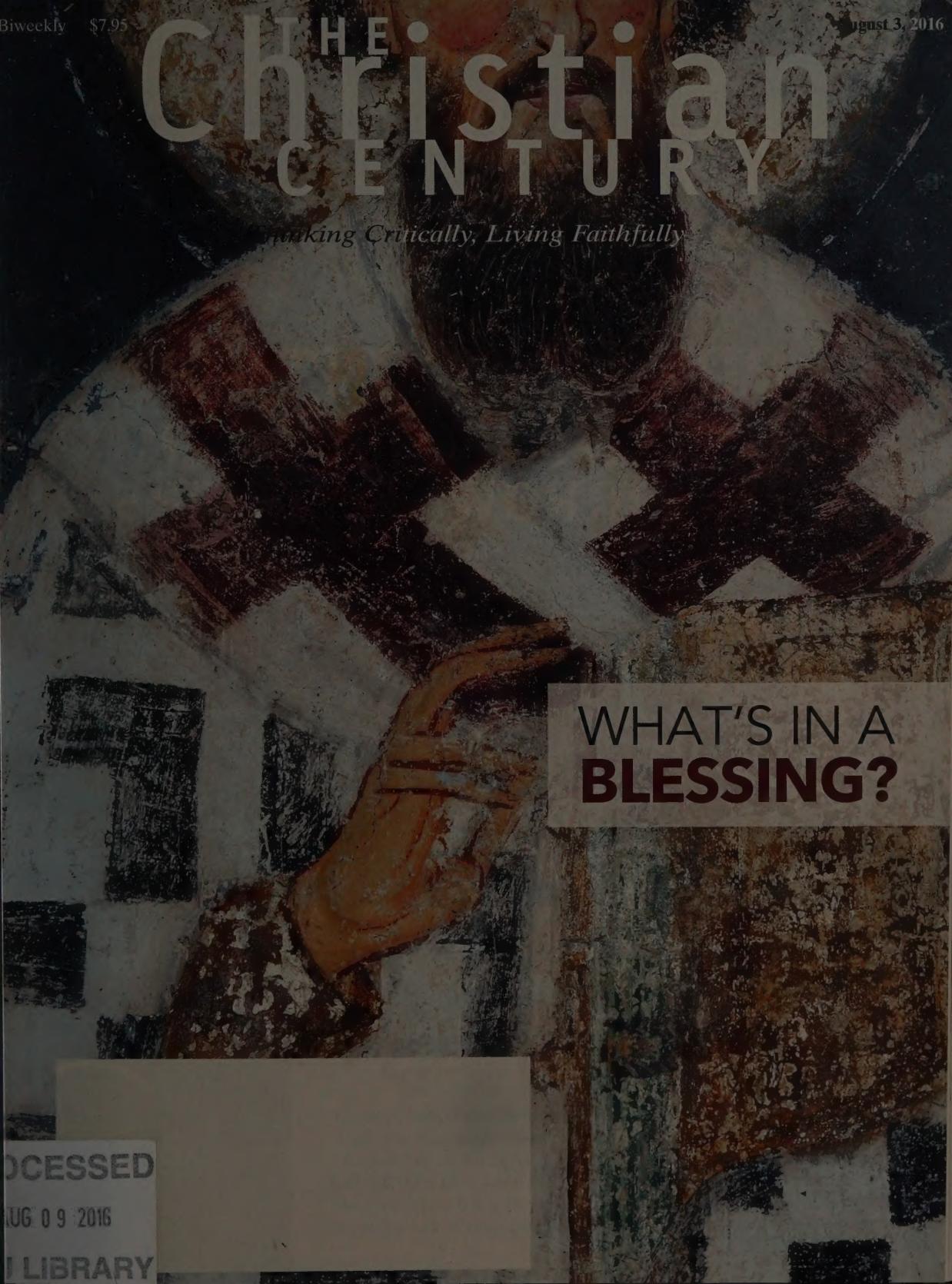


THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully

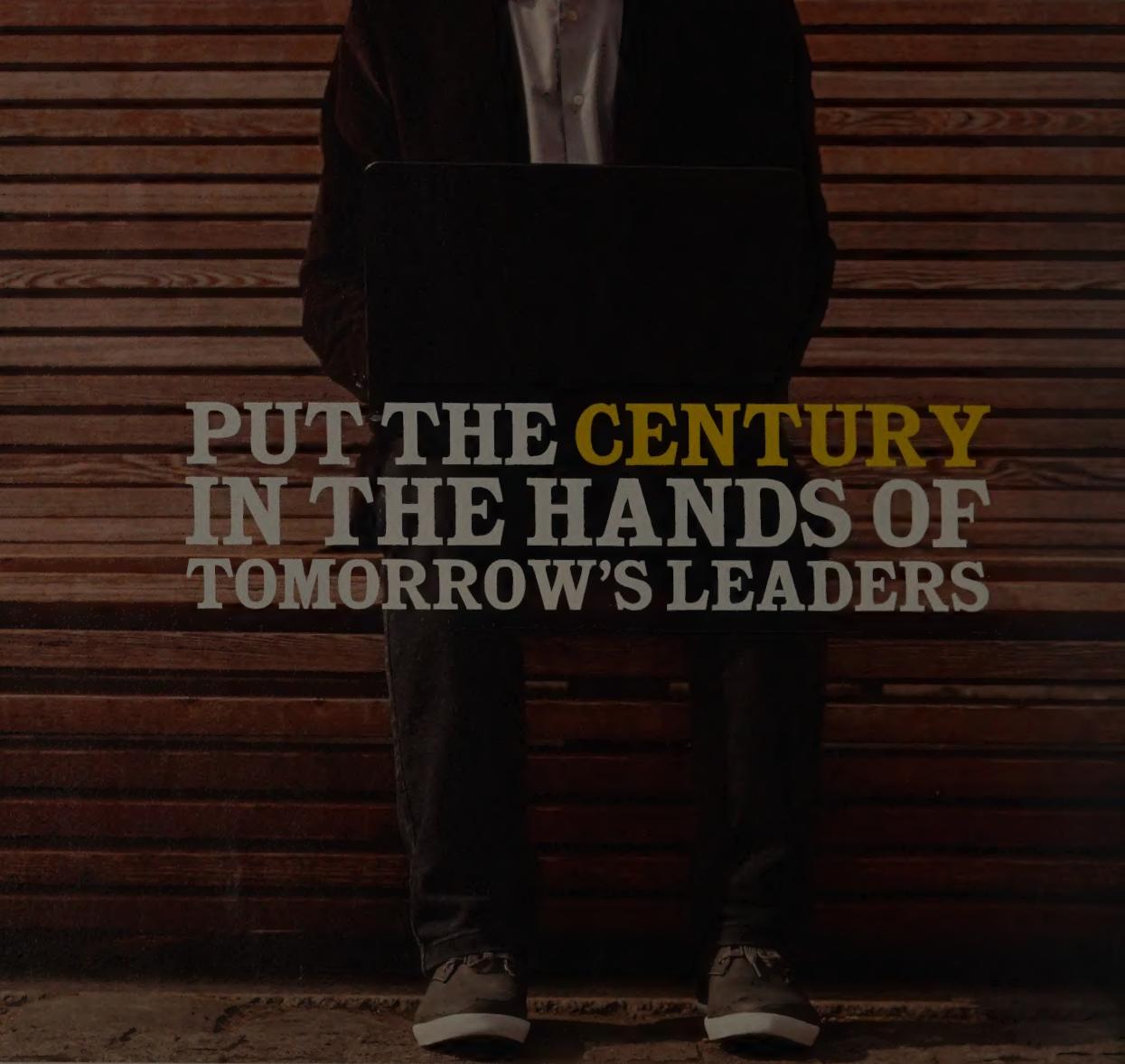


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From the publisher

Peter W. Marty

Winning an empty game

Vince Lombardi remains etched in the American psyche for one comment: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." He later regretted the way his remark seemed to spin out of control, much like a viral tweet in today's virtual world. "I wish I'd never said the damned thing," he said shortly before his death. "I meant the effort . . . I meant having a goal . . . I sure as hell didn't mean to crush human values."

Even if Lombardi had never made that comment, the idea that winning is the only worthy outcome of effort would still run deep in the human soul. We adore success. Accomplishments determine much of our sense of worth. "Climbing ladders" is a phrase we assign to other people—never ourselves, thank God!—who don't like to admit that ambition has gotten the best of them.

In an old *New Yorker* magazine cartoon, a wealthy husband and wife with self-satisfied grins sit down to dine, and the waiter introduces them to the menu. "For your convenience, the items starred are dishes associated with success, riches, power, and the like."

It would be one thing if only unbelievers were enthralled with success. But as Mark Yaconelli points out in this issue (p. 26), Christians frequently fuel their lives with the pursuit of worldly success. "Some voice inside of us tells us that faithful people are successful." In other words, keep a pious spirit central and God will grant you a successful life.

But failure and disappointment are at the heart of Christianity, just as they are basic to Christian experience. Reinhold Niebuhr condemned those who tried to make a success story out of the cross. The tree on which a man of love was despised, abandoned, and left to die is anything but a success story. The influence of that cross on the apostle Paul's life caused him to speak of "finishing the race," rather than winning the race. In the church, we sing: "Crown him the Lord of life, who triumphed o'er the grave." No one has yet been bold enough to suggest a rewrite: "Crown him the big success . . ."

In Susan Howatch's novel *Ultimate Prizes*, the sister of Archdeacon Neville Aysgarth scolds him for his empty chase of worldly success.

"You and your prizes! The only prize worth winning is love—and just you remember *that* when you're a lonely old man trying to comfort yourself with your bank balance and your fading memories!" Aysgarth later reflects on the sadness of sitting alone in his grand house. "I look around at all the mementos of my past, all my prizes, and I think: What a success I was! . . . But after a while I begin to hear that silence, that long, long silence . . . and I know with a terrible certainty that the only prize worth chasing is the prize I've managed to lose."

Chasing worldly success is an empty game. It leaves the best of us devoid of the one prize worth knowing. But in contemplating that long silence created by our empty pursuits, we become more available to living the life of love God intends. What else is the Christian life but practicing how to live that life of love, or what Yaconelli calls "God's hidden, humble work"?

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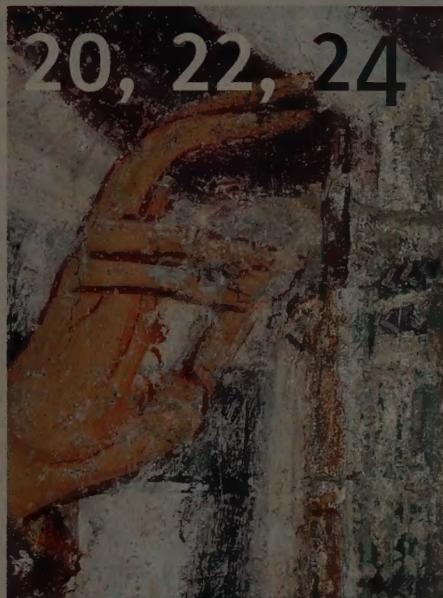
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Abrahamic faiths

Tim Valkenberg in "God(s) of Abraham" (July 6) reminds us that while we always need to know the distinctiveness of each of the Abrahamic faiths, we must also look for the common ground we share—including the common experience of the elder sibling being suspicious of God's revelation to the younger sibling.

We people of faith tend to think dualistically: "How can my religion be correct and the newer revelation also be correct? Mustn't the new truth supplant the old one?" This article is helpful to me and provides ground for teaching openness and for hope of peace.

Steve Wayles
christiancentury.org comment

What an insightful article on this vexing problem. All three Abrahamic religions have from time to time resorted to violence in the name of the religious tradition: Jews invaded Canaan, Christians invaded the holy land during the crusades, and Muslims attacked Christians in the Balkans. We are all drenched in blood, but when we follow that path we all miss the foundational messages of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad—peace.

David Kepley
christiancentury.org comment

Elliptical orbits . . .

I expect I'm not the first to point out that Peter Marty has given credit where it isn't due by attributing to Nicolaus Copernicus the discovery of "the elliptical orbits of planets revolving around the sun instead of the earth" ("The true eccentric," June 8).

Copernicus did indeed initiate the so-called Copernican Revolution with his proposal that the planets revolve around the sun rather than the earth. However, the discovery that the orbital paths they follow are elliptical rather than circular was made not by Copernicus but more

than half a century later by Johannes Kepler, a good German Lutheran.

George Harper
Manila, Philippines

Evil under the flag . . .

I read with great interest the news article "Cathedral to remove glass Confederate flags" (July 6) and applaud this important symbolic step at the Washington National Cathedral. But much more important are the planned discussions around the theme of race and racism, which to have an impact must go beyond the usual pious platitudes to actual repentance and restitution.

In the picture of the stained glass panels, I noted that two American flags are part of the artwork. I did not read of any discussion of the immense social evils associated with the Stars and Stripes. The evils committed under the American flag are ten times worse than those committed under the Confederate flag.

Lowell Noble
Riceville, Iowa

Choices and consequences . . .

In "Deferred dreams" (June 22), Amy Frykholm dips a toe into murky moral waters. Immigration is a matter of individual choice. All choices have multiple consequences, which we tend to categorize (falsely) as good or bad. Living in an entitlement era, we find it easy to hope or expect or to lobby to be relieved from what we think are the bad consequences, even as we insist on retaining full measure of the good ones.

A political conversation needs to be about borders—what they mean and what purposes they serve. Fortunately, Frykholm's piece suggests an optimistic future for immigrant teenager Brayhan, whatever the political outcomes.

Spike Forbes
Sheridan, Wyo.

August 3, 2016

Athletes without borders

The International Olympic Committee has announced that a team made up of refugees from around the globe will participate in the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. The ten refugees will compete under the Olympic banner and their participation is being funded by the IOC. The athletes—who would otherwise have been excluded because they lack a national team to play for—include a Somalian runner who was raised in a refugee camp in Kenya, a Syrian swimmer who has been training in Belgium, and a Congolese judoka who trains in Brazil.

This is the first time that the Olympics have included such a team, and it's appropriate in a year when the number of displaced people in the world reached a record 65 million. The president of the IOC, Thomas Bach, has said that the purpose of the team is to give hope to refugees everywhere. That is a noble sentiment, and the IOC deserves praise for its creative response to a global crisis.

Watching the refugees compete under an international flag that belongs to the whole world might also inspire new reflection on the meaning and purpose of a nation in a world of citizens and noncitizens. When the modern Olympic Games were founded in 1896, they were built on the idea that the people of the world could come together in peace for the sake of healthy competition—the fighting would be on the sports field, not the battlefield.

At their best the games have fostered mutual respect and understanding between people of different cultures and nations. But organized as they have been by nationality, the games have often been surrounded by—and sometimes encouraged—unhealthy forms of nationalism. In 1936 the Nazis used the Berlin games to promote a racist and nationalist ideology. Coordinated use of performance-enhancing drugs—for which the Russian track team has been banned this year—is another sign of nationalism gone awry. The American media's focus on counting the number of medals won by the U.S. team is another worrisome form of nationalism.

Political scientist Benedict Anderson says that a modern nation is always an "imagined political community." The meaning of nation is something created by peoples and cultures over time. The Olympics captivate us in part because they conjure up and connect us, in an intense form of imagined belonging, to a nation. We cheer on strangers whom we regard as "our own" through an imaginative act of what Anderson calls "deep, horizontal comradeship."

Perhaps at this Olympics, by cheering on the refugee team, people of every nation can find a deep, horizontal comradeship with 65 million displaced people—people like Rami Anis, a swimmer who fled his home in Syria at the age of 15 and who says that "the swimming pool is my home." Maybe Anis and his teammates can inspire us to make our own nation more open to those who have been forced to find new ways of belonging.

The Olympic games are often surrounded by unhealthy forms of nationalism.

CENTURY marks

WELCOME MAT: The Canadian government affords citizens a rare opportunity and responsibility: they can band together in groups to adopt refugees from Syria. The sponsorship program provides financial support and practical aid to refugees for a year and helps them learn English and find jobs. The Trudeau government first committed to taking 25,000 refugees, then added more. The Canadian immigration minister said he can't keep up with the demand of people wanting to sponsor refugees. President Obama pledged that the United States would take 10,000 Syrian refugees, but so far only about half that many have been admitted into the country (*New York Times*, July 1).

BASEBALL BOYCOTT: Nathan Dannison, senior pastor of First Congregational Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, says the only weapon Jesus carried openly was the cross. Dannison started a boycott against the Battle Creek Bombers, the local minor league team, after it held a Second Amendment Rights night and encouraged fans to openly carry their weapons to a game. A hunter and a gun owner himself, Dannison is tired of open-weapons advocates controlling the arguments about gun control. His church members have been supportive of the boycott. "Jesus conquered death," Dannison said. "There is no reason for a Christian of good faith to

carry a weapon" (*Huffington Post*, June 28).

ABSOLUTION GRANTED: Martin Boehm was a key player in founding the United Brethren in Christ denomination, one of the precursors of the United Methodist Church. More than 240 years ago, Boehm was excommunicated after having a Wesleyan-type spiritual awakening that led to his preaching to people outside of his Mennonite church. Pennsylvania Mennonites recently denounced "the small-mindedness of religious thinking" that led to Boehm's ouster, restored his Mennonite credentials, and asked local United Methodists forgiveness for their spiritual forebears' narrowness (UMNS, June 27).



BLUE LIVES: Gary Holden, founder of the Police Chaplain Program, says his organization started seeing an uptick in requests for chaplaincy services after African-American men died at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland. Holden characterizes the police chaplaincy as a ministry of presence to police officers and to the communities they serve. To earn the trust of those in a community, chaplains ride along with police officers and attend community events. "We do a lot of hugging just to let [people] know we care," Holden said (NPR, July 10).

GLOOMY OUTLOOK: Many African Americans say they didn't realize how racist the country is until it elected its first black president. They say it's been very painful watching racist reactions to the first family. There has been a mood change in the African-American com-

munity during the Obama administration; many are less hopeful about the future of the country and more suspicious of white people. White-black friendships have been frayed over arguments about whether opposition to Obama is motivated by racism or by policy disagreements (CNN, July 1).

UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT: In order to write about the inner workings of a private prison, journalist Shane Bauer took a prison guard position at a Louisiana prison for four months, at \$9 an hour. The prison is operated by Corrections Corporation of America, whose CEO made \$3.4 million in 2015, nearly 19 times the amount paid to the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. During Bauer's time as a correctional officer, the federal Department of Corrections temporarily took charge of the prison due to a rash of stabbings among inmates. Thirty-four percent of prison guards suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, a rate higher than that for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Correctional officers commit suicide two and a half times more frequently than the general population (*Mother Jones*, July/August).

DEMON POSSESSED: Richard Gallagher, a board-certified psychiatrist and professor of clinical psychiatry at New York Medical College, was skeptical when a priest/exorcist asked his opinion of a woman diagnosed with demonic possession. In time Gallagher's scientific habits of observation led him to believe that in rare cases, the only explanation for bizarre behavior is that it's the work of evil spirits. Over the past 25 years he has consulted with hundreds of ministers, helping them to distinguish between mental illness and demonic possession. Gallagher, a practicing Catholic, is working on a book about demonic possession in the United States (*Washington Post*, July 1).

EXTREME MEASURE: The bombing of the Medina mosque where Muhammad is supposedly buried wasn't the only recent violent act condemned by a broad spectrum of Muslims. In June a mother was killed by twin sons when

“For generations, black and brown parents have given their children ‘the talk’—instructing them never to run down the street; always keep your hands where they can be seen; do not even think of talking back to a stranger—all out of fear of how an officer with a gun will react to them.”

— Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor (CNN, June 21)

“If you want interracial killing, you have to have interracial communities.”

— Georgetown University professor Michael Eric Dyson, responding to the criticism that black communities protest police shootings of African Americans while playing down “black on black” crime, or what Dyson calls “neighbor-to-neighbor carnage” (*New York Times*, July 7)

she refused to let them go to Syria to join ISIS. The killing has provoked a debate among elite Muslims over the influence of Ibn Taymiyya, 13th-century Islamic scholar who espoused a version of Islam that prescribed a severe form of excommunication used by ISIS to justify killing those viewed as apostate Muslims. Many in Saudi society who support strict measures of purifying Islam thought this matricide went too far (*Christian Science Monitor*, July 6).

DRY BONES: The discovery of a Philistine cemetery outside the walls of the ancient city Ashkelon on the southern coast of Israel may provide clues to the

origins of the ancient Philistines. A team of scholars is using DNA research and other techniques to determine the Philistines' origins. Existing archaeological and textual evidence indicates that they originated somewhere in the Aegean region (*National Geographic*, July).

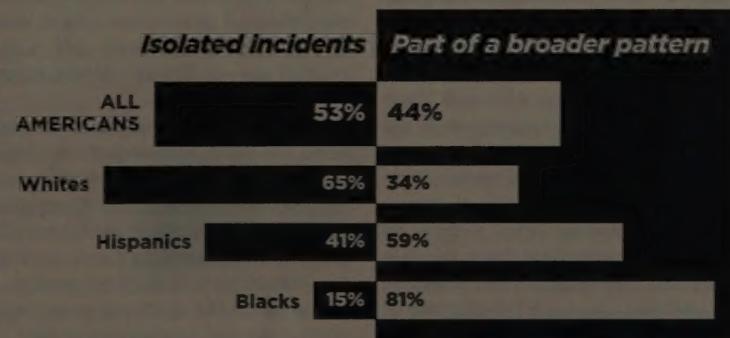
GOD V. COUNTRY: LifeWay

Research found that 53 percent of 1,000 Protestant pastors polled agreed that sometimes their congregations seem to love America more than God: 59 percent of pastors in the South, as compared to 51 percent in the Midwest and 42 percent in the West (LifeWay Research, June 30).

COINCIDENTAL KILLINGS?

SOURCE: PRRI

Are recent killings of African-American men isolated incidents or are they part of a broader pattern of how police treat African Americans?





Notes from the farm

Field of greens

by Terra Brockman

EVERY SPRING brings warm breezes, the undulating flight of returning songbirds, and the mad desire of the earth to clothe herself in green. By the time the summer solstice rolls around, plants' chloroplasts are working overtime, and our farm explodes in a riotous symphony with variations on the color green.

Lately, I've been more mindful of all those shades of green. Because my father's eyesight is failing, it is now my job to bring the dogs down the steep back hill to the bottomland vegetable field each evening and back up each morning. Overnight, they are on guard duty, protecting lettuce and other greens from the deer. Although those deer have plenty of sustenance in the woods, they can't resist the all-you-can-eat salad bar of radicchio, endive, escarole, and some 50 varieties of lettuce laid out in inviting rows. Before we started bringing the dogs down, the deer would take a taste of this and a taste of that, nibbling the tender center out of each plant. From a distance, the row

looked perfect, but up close you saw that each plant was just a circle of outer leaves enclosing thin air.

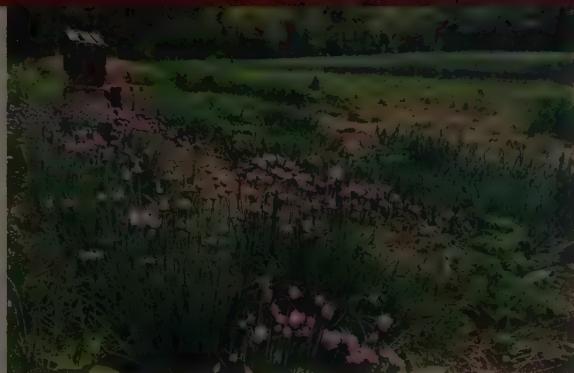
To thwart the deer's gourmet impulses, the dogs and I travel each morning and evening through a world awash in chlorophyll. Most often we start at the hilltop, passing under the ancient white oak. (I'm not quite sure why it's called white, given its glossy, deep green leaves; perhaps white refers to its light-colored, ash-gray trunk.) As the breeze ruffles the palm-sized leaves, shiny dark green on top and matte silver-green on the undersides, I remember when those leaves emerged newborn just a few months ago—a delicate, downy, silvery pink.

As I leave the stately oak and start down the steep, narrow path, the world becomes a lyrical study in viridescence, from the bright new green of multiflora rose leaves to the dark, almost metallic green of the hickory. As I walk, it strikes me that there's a terrible paucity of words for all the shades of green, especially given that it's the color of life.

SUMMER RICHES: From left to right, new oak leaves, rows of lettuces, climbing peas, blossoming chives, a fallow field of legumes and grasses, and spinach plants. All photos by Terra Brockman.

Life on earth would not exist without green plants, and plants are green mainly because of chlorophyll, the complex chemical crucial to photosynthesis. Photosynthesis, you may recall from high school biology class, is the process by which plants convert the energy of the sun into the carbohydrate fuel that powers them and all animals, including us. Think of the debt you owe chlorophyll the next time you have a cup of coffee or tea (both from plants) with cream (from an animal that eats plants) and sugar (another plant).

Because green plants are the foundation of the food web and all around us, I wonder that we do not have as many words for green as the Inuit are said to have for snow. In the herb bouquet on my table as I write are, for starters, dill green, sage green, tarragon green, lovage green, and mint green in three sub-shades—spearmint green, peppermint green, and mojito mint green. And every one of those greens is different, ranging from the silvery gray-green of sage to the electric gold-green of lovage.



As the dogs and I reach the bottom of our descent down the back hill, a curtain of seven-foot-tall prairie grasses in shades of sea-blue-green-gray hides us for a few moments. Then we emerge into the rhubarb patch, and walk along a row of deep green elephant-ear leaves, standing tall on their bright red petioles. At the corner of the rhubarb patch, we hop over the tiny creek that drains rainwater from the ravine into the stream. Then the fallow field opens before us.

My brother Henry's fields work hard growing vegetables for two years, and then they get two years off to rest and regenerate. Back in March, Henry tilled in the cover crops that had protected the soil from winter winds and rain and then seeded the fallow field in a mixture of legumes and grasses. By the end of May, the plants were armpit-tall, an enticing mixture of colors and textures, from the soft, velvety blue-green of clover and alfalfa to the pale, stiff stalks of orchard grass, rye grass, and oats. In early June we mowed the fallow field for the first cutting of hay. If all goes well, by the end of

the season we should have two or three more cuttings.

Although we will bale the hay and use it to mulch the tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, kale, and potatoes, the fallow field is not working but resting. Or, perhaps more accurately, it's on a working vacation. Each legume (alfalfa, crimson clover, red clover, berseem clover) is actually a solar-powered nitrogen fertilizer factory. The nitrogen-fixing bacteria that live on legume roots transform atmospheric nitrogen into a form that's available for plants. In this way, Henry is able to grow his own nitrogen fertilizer rather than purchase synthetically produced nitrogen fertilizer made by burning immense amounts of fossil fuels. And while the field lies fallow and the soil is undisturbed, other microorganisms do their important underground work—multiplying and connecting, creating networks that go broad and deep, making the "glue" that holds healthy soil together and makes nutrients available to the vegetables that will grow here later.

This year's working field is on the

other side of Walnut Creek, so the dogs and I wade across the rocky ford to enter the field just coming off its two fallow years and now exploding with verdant life. Just yesterday we harvested hundreds of crates of spinach green, arugula green, endive green, sorrel green, and lettuce green. I drink in these greens and am nearly drunk on them as I tie the dogs near doghouses positioned at opposite ends of the 200-foot-long beds. I give them a quick hug and thank-you before walking back through the patchwork field of greens.

In the strong searchlight of the setting sun, I can almost see the pulsing chlorophyll molecules dancing in each cell of each leaf of lettuce, kale, and chard, almost hear them playing their symphony of photosynthesis. Then the sun slips below the horizon, and the music fades as the silver slipper of a moon rises. CC

*Terra Brockman is an author, a speaker, and a fourth-generation farmer from central Illinois. Her book, *The Seasons on Henry's Farm*, was a finalist for a 2010 James Beard Award.*

Is Brexit cause or effect of rise in hate?

When it succeeded, Britain's campaign to leave the European Union, called Brexit, shook up a deeply unpopular political order. Its anti-immigration platform appears to resonate with many voters. But a rise in reports of hate crimes may lend merit to fears that the referendum's outcome could have ugly effects for Britain's minorities.

A prayer event planned by the British Bangladeshi Cultural Academy in celebration of Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan, was canceled in Southampton, England, after the BBCA discovered that activists from a far-right anti-immigrant group would converge on the city for a rally.

The National Police Chiefs' Council said that in the week immediately following the Brexit vote on June 23, a U.K. national online hotline had received 331 reports of hate crime incidents, compared to a weekly average of 63 reports.

The NPCC noted that the reports accounted only for those made through one channel and that the "extensive focus" on the issue had likely encouraged more people than usual to report. "We also cannot determine how many of the reports are linked to the referendum," it wrote.

Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, said that "catalytic events" like the vote to leave the European Union are sometimes followed by a temporary spike in hate crimes.

"What I think we've seen in England with the Brexit vote is that there have been significant increases [in reports] that can't be adequately explained but for that catalytic event," he says. But he

cautions against attributing the spike to the referendum alone. "These events oftentimes are tied to more long-standing conflicts, anxieties, and fears that can be exploited, like a gusty wind can spread a wildfire on a dry summer day."

Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim feeling in Britain may have inspired an increase in incidents dating back to before the Brexit campaign. One watchdog's report, based on data from 15 police departments, found a 326 percent increase in anti-Muslim incidents in 2015, although the Brexit campaign did not officially begin until April 2016.

Most of the post-Brexit complaints catalogued by the police chiefs' council

appear to stem from verbal altercations rather than physical violence. Several laws in the United Kingdom allow for the prosecution of hate speech, including one 1986 law that prohibits "threatening, abusive, or insulting" written materials intended to "stir up racial hatred."

In the aftermath of the referendum, the NPCC said, "migrants are reporting verbal abuse, negative social media commentary including xenophobic language, antimigrant leafleting, and, in very limited numbers, physical assaults."

"When a nation feels like its policies aren't serving them, it's valid that they hold a vote," Levin said. "The problem is



ISLAM IN THE U.K.: A woman cooks tagine, a North African and Arab dish, at Camden Lock Village in London. Britain has seen a rise in anti-Muslim attacks before and after its vote to leave the European Union, with one report stating that women are more likely to be attacked than men.

that the vote also became about immigration and the loss of some kind of national character which sometimes hit the third rail of bigotry."

A report from the organization Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) recorded 437 incidents of anti-Muslim hatred in 2015, including assault and verbal abuse, up from 146 the year before. Women were more likely than men to be attacked, with white men often identified as the perpetrators.

Tell MAMA recorded a spike in incidents against Muslims after the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris. There were 82 such acts in the three weeks following the deadly bombings and shootings, compared with 25 in the same period before the attacks.

"We are in a period where, post Brexit, some feel that their hatred and prejudice has been legitimized, and we are in a period where terrorism and extremism fuels anti-Muslim hatred," the organization said in a statement.

The report was dedicated to Jo Cox, a British member of Parliament who was murdered on June 16. A Labour politician, Cox campaigned tirelessly for Syrian refugees, supported religious diversity, and had been due to launch the new report, according to U.K. media.

British faith leaders published a letter in the *Times* newspaper on July 1 confronting the fear and mistrust that have followed the Brexit vote. The letter was signed by Ephraim Mirvis, chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth; Justin Welby, archbishop of Canterbury; Vincent Nichols, archbishop of Westminster; and Ali Raza Rizvi, president of the Muslim organization Majlis Ulama-e-Shia (Europe).

"For all that lies outside of our personal control, every person has the power to conquer their own instinct to apportion blame to others for perceived injustice," the leaders wrote. "Today we call upon every citizen of our great country to recognize personal accountability for their every action, rather than avoiding that responsibility by looking for scapegoats, and to challenge racial and communal prejudice wherever it is found." —David Iaconangelo, *The Christian Science Monitor*; Rosie Scammell, Religion News Service

The Muslim Brotherhood weighs its options amid political challenges

THE MUSLIM Brotherhood lost its last real stronghold in the Arab world when Jordan shuttered the movement's headquarters in Amman this spring.

Just five years after the movement's star seemed to be rising, as Qatar and Turkey sought to export Islamism after the Arab Spring from the Gulf to North Africa, the Brotherhood is suffering from a crackdown in Egypt and faces bans in much of the Arab Gulf.

The movement must decide whether to yield to younger members agitating for a more aggressive approach or carve out a new identity—perhaps in the model of Tunisia's Muslim democrats. Some worry that if it fails to regain clout as a legitimate political movement, the result could be further extremism in the region.

By preventing the Brotherhood from carrying out its religious and social services, observers warn that the Jordanian government—and others across the region—have opened the way for hard-line Salafists to fill the void.

Jordan shut down the Brotherhood in April, claiming the 60-year-old organization was improperly licensed. Officials gave no other reason for the decision, but observers and government insiders say it was retribution for the group's role in Arab Spring protests in Jordan and demands for the country to shift to a constitutional monarchy and roll back the king's powers.

The government has since closed several branches of the movement's political arm, the Islamic Action Front, frozen the Brotherhood's assets, prevented senior members from leaving the country, and banned the movement from holding Ramadan activities such as hosting iftar meals for the needy to break their fasts.

The IAF is taking part in Jordan's parliamentary elections in September but can neither raise funds nor hold rallies. A governor's order banning the Brotherhood from holding internal elections has crippled the movement.

"They are waging a war on us," said

Ali Abu Sukkar, deputy of the IAF and senior Jordan Brotherhood official.

In their place, Salafists are sponsoring iftar meals. Ultraconservative Salafist leaders dominate the airwaves. In Egypt, Salafists such as the al-Nour Party are the only Islamists in parliament.

"The losses suffered by the Muslim Brotherhood are a victory for Salafists who are trying to control the narrative of Islam," said Hassan Abu Haniyeh, a Jordanian scholar of Islamist movements.

The Brotherhood's youth leadership is now looking for a more aggressive, assertive Brotherhood than in the past, in order to respond to regional pressures.

"It is a question of whether the Muslim Brotherhood should work to return to power in the long term and focus instead on *dawah* [proselytizing], or whether it should work on a return to power in the near term," said Eric Trager, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "The young generation saw the Brotherhood have their moment in power and—in their eyes—taken away from them. They want to return now."

But while the crackdown is pushing some young activists to become hard-line, the pressure is also having the opposite effect: pushing many leaders to consider making the movement more moderate, appealing to non-Islamists and appearing less threatening to regimes.

Central to this effort is separating the Brotherhood's preaching from politics. By doing so, the movement's leaders believe that they can avoid the intimidation and animosity it stirred among leftist and secular political groups in Egypt who later backed overthrowing the leaders.

"Separating the preaching from the politics is not just a theory, it has become a necessity," Abu Sukkar said. "The times are changing, and we have to change."

The Brotherhood sees a model in Ennahda, the Tunisian party that has twice taken part in coalition govern-

Anti-Semitic assaults increase in U.S.

VIOLENT anti-Semitic attacks in the United States rose 50 percent last year to a total of 56, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

"And we know that for every incident reported, there's likely another that goes unreported," said Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the ADL, which produced the study and calls the trend "very concerning."

The increase occurred as the total number of anti-Semitic incidents—including physical and verbal assaults and vandalism—remained fairly steady, rising 3 percent from 2014.

Examples of anti-Semitic assaults in 2015 include the following:

- An assailant in Boca Raton, Florida, shouted, "Jews should go back to Auschwitz" and struck a rabbinical student, who fell to the pavement.
- Two people walking home from synagogue in Brooklyn were pelted with eggs by four perpetrators shouting, "You f--- Jews. I am going to kill you."
- Two assailants approached a high school student wearing a yarmulke in Denver and yelled, "Hey kike, when I talk to you, you talk back," and threw a large rock that hit the victim on the back.

Overall the number of anti-Semitic incidents is "historically low," according to the ADL, which was founded to combat anti-Semitism and other bigotry and started tracking anti-Semitic incidents in 1979.

The peak since then was in 2006, when 1,554 incidents were reported. The general trend since then has been a decline. And as in past years, more anti-Semitic incidents occurred in states with larger Jewish populations. New York and California again led the list, followed by New Jersey, Florida, and Massachusetts.

But the ADL report, its authors noted, does not include most expressions of anti-Semitism, which has exploded online and on social media in particular. The report includes inci-

dents of online anti-Semitism directed at a Jewish person or institution, but not general expressions of anti-Semitism.

"The issue has grown exponentially in recent years because the Internet provides racists and bigots with an outlet to reach a potential audience of millions," Greenblatt said.

The ADL in future years plans to capture in its report more online anti-Semitism, which researchers tracked with the rise in political expression this election season.

Another category in the report that defies the longer-term, general trend of declining anti-Semitic incidents is the steep rise in anti-Semitic incidents on college campuses. Those nearly doubled, from 47 incidents on 43 campuses in 2014 to 90 incidents on 60 campuses in 2015.

This finding dovetails with findings of another recent report, which focuses entirely on the rise in anti-Semitism at American colleges and universities. A report from the AMCHA Initiative blames supporters of the movement to boycott Israel as "the primary agents of anti-Semitic activity" on campuses.

Among the anti-Semitic incidents on American colleges and universities included in the ADL report were these:

- A student found a swastika and the word *Jew* taped next to his Israeli flag at Drexel University in Philadelphia.
- The phrase "Zionists should be sent to the gas chamber" was found in a campus restroom and on another university-owned building at the University of California at Berkeley.
- Vandals spray-painted swastikas on the exterior wall of a Jewish fraternity at the University of California at Davis.

Anti-Semitism in Europe and the Middle East presents a yet larger problem, with anti-Semitism manifesting itself in more violence toward Jewish people. —Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service

ments with secular parties. It announced recently that it was ending all religious activities and shedding its "Islamist" label. Their new title: Muslim democrats.

Such a rebranding, Brotherhood leaders believe, would allow it to reenter Jordanian politics and open up opportunities in the Arab Gulf and elsewhere.

Yet due to leadership struggles within the Jordanian and Egyptian Brotherhood, the idea has stalled—pushing some Brotherhood leaders to set out on their own and establish separate Muslim democrat parties.

Salem Fallahat, former overall leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, is gathering like-minded Brotherhood leaders fed up with the movement's rigidity and non-Islamists to follow in the steps of Ennahda.

The new party, which will be called Hukama, or the Wise, is to be a national unity party, with its core tenets inspired by Islam but with the word *Islam* left off the policy agenda.

"What we need right now is a political movement supported by Islamists, not an Islamist movement," Fallahat said.

Yet observers and rival Brotherhood members have cast doubt over whether such defections can be successful without the movement's broad religious and social services.

"Islamist parties are not traditional parties, and that is what makes them effective," said Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution, whose book, *Islamic Exceptionalism*, details the evolution of movements such as the Brotherhood.

"They draw on a larger movement which makes them successful—when you give that up, you are giving up one of your main electoral advantages."

But scholars say it is too early to write off the movement.

The Brotherhood plays an active role behind the scenes in the Syrian opposition, while its Islah party in Yemen is waiting in the wings to play a role in the country's reconstruction after the current conflict ends.

"The Middle East is quite fluid—even if the movement is weak one day, in the next few days it can reemerge as a powerful actor," Hamid said. —Taylor Luck, *The Christian Science Monitor*

Church of Sweden renews connections with drop-in weddings and baptisms

You can drop in at a hairdresser without an appointment or show up at a clinic unscheduled. But what about a drop-in church wedding or a baptism?

You can have one in Sweden.

The idea came to Jerker Alsterlund, a pastor in the city of Västerås and an vintage car enthusiast, when he attended the Power Big Meet American car show near Västerås in 2008.

"A couple had asked me to marry them there, which I did," he said. "But when I was there, another woman asked me if I could marry her and her partner, too. I said, 'That's not how it works; you have to be prepared.' But afterwards I realized that it's the church that's not prepared. And I realized that there are lots of couples like them."

Before returning to the show the following year, Alsterlund told car magazines that he would be offering drive-in nuptials. He enlisted nine other pastors to assist, and 60 couples got married.

"If they say that they love each other and want the church's blessing of their relationship, it's my obligation to marry them," he said.

As Alsterlund sees it, drop-in weddings and baptisms are a way for the Church of Sweden to create a connection to the millions of people who are members but who don't participate in their parish's services and other activities.

"Otherwise they start thinking, why should I be a member anyway?" he said.

Other pastors—primarily in the Church of Sweden—picked up the idea, performing drop-in weddings in their own churches, and in short order drop-in baptisms followed. Such rituals are now offered in churches in every major city along with many smaller towns, though the Church of Sweden doesn't collect statistics on how many.

At first church representatives were aghast at what they saw as cavalier treatment of the liturgy. Then, three years ago Alsterlund received the Church of Sweden's Innovator of the Year award.



PHOTO BY RUTGER BLOM VIA CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

WALKING DOWN THE AISLE: *Visitors explore the medieval cathedral of Lund, Sweden. Some Church of Sweden congregations have been offering drop-in baptisms and weddings. Forty-five couples went to the cathedral on a spring Saturday to be married by one of the church's pastors.*

"He has found formats that meet members who don't belong to the parish core," the jury wrote.

And the drop-in sacraments continue to be popular. On one Saturday in April at the medieval cathedral in the southern city of Lund, 45 couples, some with guests and some without, came to get married. The cathedral supplied pastors, musicians, and witnesses.

"We've had drop-in baptism days before, with between four and 17 children baptized each time," said Josefina Andersson, a pastor at the cathedral. "We thought if 20 couples turn up to get married, it's excellent. But then 45 couples turned up. We almost thought we'd not be able to accommodate all of them."

But Andersson and her colleagues got all of the couples married. As planned, each couple had a 20-minute premarital talk with one of the pastors, chose two hymns and a song, and went to one of the altars with the pastor and the musician for their 20-minute ceremony.

"It gets really condensed this way," Andersson said. "You get to the important parts straightforward."

The Church of Sweden struggles with the same problem as many other mainstream denominations in Europe, especially those that are state churches or have been (the Church of Sweden separated from the state in 2000). While they

may have a large number of members, the number of active ones is often tiny.

Last year 63.2 percent of Sweden's 9.9 million residents belonged to the Church of Sweden, down from 86 percent in 1995. And during the same time, annual service attendance has dropped from 9 million to 4 million.

According to Magdalena Nordin, an assistant professor of the sociology of religion at the University of Lund, the Church of Sweden needs new strategies.

"The church has to do something," she said. "This way more people will get married in church and will get baptized. And in a small intimate ceremony people pay more attention to what is being said, whereas a large ceremony means the couple is often very nervous because it's such a big social event."

The Church of Sweden has not yet measured whether it has resulted in the couples and families remaining involved with their parishes. But Alsterlund has made his own observations over the past eight years.

"I get a lot of e-mails from the couples and families," he said. "Around three-quarters of them stay in touch. Many tell me about their parishes at home, what they think of the pastor. And many do get involved in their parishes."

And Nordin, who studies religious participation, argues that drop-in ceremonies don't necessarily mean that the couples and families take the rituals less seriously.

"Perhaps some take it lightly, but I'm not sure that people with large ceremonies take the religious aspect more seriously," she said.

Pastors who have performed drop-in weddings and baptisms report that the ceremonies, stripped as they are of all the social attributes, mean the couples and families sign up for them for the right reasons. And, counterintuitive though it may seem, drop-in ceremonies may focus couples' and families' attention on the Christian aspect.

"Drop-in sounds very superficial, sloppy, like an assembly line," Alsterlund said. "But drop-in weddings and baptisms are helping us rescue Christian ceremonies from the commercial powers that have taken over our ceremonies and redefined them." —Elisabeth Braw, *The Christian Science Monitor*

What could bring seekers to church? survey asks

The “seekers” have left the church—if they ever came.

LifeWay Research has looked at what might draw them in, zeroing in on people who say they have not attended a religious service in the past six months except for special events or holidays.

Worship? Not particularly interested, two in three people told researchers from the evangelical firm, which is based in Nashville, Tennessee.

Talk about God? Not so much, said three in four of the 2,000 people in the survey—including 57 percent who identified as Christians.

“Are a lot of Americans on a conscious journey to learn who Jesus Christ is?” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay. “I don’t think so.”

Even that old seeker standby—the search for meaning—doesn’t cut it for many. Although 57 percent of those surveyed said finding “their deeper purpose” is “a major priority,” 31 percent disagreed at least somewhat and 12 percent were unsure.

Yet 70 percent of people who do not attend religious services agreed that “there is an ultimate purpose and plan for every person’s life.”

But whose plan is the unanswered question. LifeWay deliberately didn’t mention God in asking about “plan” and “purpose,” McConnell said, because it wanted to assess whether people had “a framework of wanting to make better, or the best, choices for life.”

However, offering a venue to “express compassion” can be a top draw for churches, according to Rick Richardson, professor of evangelism and leadership at Wheaton College. He is a research fellow for the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, which sponsored the survey.

Nearly 62 percent would come for a meeting at church on neighborhood safety. Other ways people could be inspired to visit were for events such as concerts (51 percent), sports or exercise programs (46 percent), or a neighborhood get-together (45 percent).

Only 11 percent said they’d change

the subject if religion came up in conversation. Most (51 percent) said a personal invitation from a friend or family member could draw them to church.

But only one in five would accept if that invitation came from a church member knocking at their door, a TV commercial, a postcard, or a Facebook ad.

Bringing people into church is “a different kind of conversation,” McConnell said. “We need to say take it one day at a time: ‘Let’s introduce you to Jesus and see what you think.’”

The survey was conducted May 23–June 1. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points. —Cathy Lynn Grossman, Religion News Service

Medical workers in Israel support each other’s religious observance

Stuart Levy, a nurse at a Jerusalem hospital, updates his ward’s work schedule several times a week with staffers’ vacations, birthdays, and more religious holidays than many people know exist.

“We have 18 hospital beds, and on any given day we may have an Orthodox Jew next to a devout Muslim next to a Catholic next to a Druze next to a Russian Orthodox patient,” said Levy, head nurse of the oncology/hematology ward at Hadassah Medical Center. “And many of our staff are religiously observant.”

During Ramadan, Levy asked Jewish nurses to work evening shifts to allow Muslim nurses to break their fasts at home. Non-Jewish nurses reciprocate by working on Jewish holidays.

Juggling so many holidays, as well as the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sabbaths on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, can be a logistical nightmare. But Levy views it as an exercise in empathy.

“There is an unwritten rule at Hadassah that if we can accommodate the needs of people of every faith, we will,” he said.

Rula Badarna, a Muslim nurse on the ward, agreed: “We have great cooperation in this department.”

Jews compose about 75 percent of Israel’s population; Muslims, 17 percent;

Christians, 2 percent; and Druze—a religion native to the Middle East that combines a number of traditions—nearly 2 percent. The remaining 4 percent are part of even smaller religious minorities or have no official religion.

Another employer known for its religious sensitivity is United Hatzalah, a national emergency medical response organization. Jewish and Muslim coworkers make a point of not eating in front of one another on their respective fast days, according to Amnon Abadi, operational communications manager.

Muslims work on the Jewish sabbath and holidays to allow some of their Jewish coworkers to take off, while their Jewish coworkers work overtime or the evening shift so their Muslim coworkers can break their Ramadan fasts and celebrate festivals.

“We’ve been working together for years,” said Ramzi Battash, a Muslim dispatcher, in the crowded control room. “We go to each other’s weddings. When we save a life we don’t ask who is Jewish or who is Arab. We are all people.”

Orit Cohen, an Orthodox Jewish nurse at Hadassah, said respect goes far beyond holiday observance: “People deal with death and mourning in very different ways. Bottom line, though, everyone is a human being.”

On Hadassah’s bone marrow transplant ward, staffers and patients are well aware of every terror attack or military action in the news, said Yevgeni Frank Kamenetsky, the head nurse.

“We’re leftists, rightists, Muslims, Christians, Jews,” he said. “But we make it work, even after work. We socialize. We go to the movies together, picnic together.”

Ahmad Shiber, a bone marrow transplant nurse, turns lights and appliances on and off during the sabbath and holidays for Orthodox Jewish patients, whose beliefs prohibit those actions. Similarly, he writes prescriptions on behalf of Jewish staffers on the sabbath.

“Our department is the last resort for patients: many will not survive,” Shiber said. “We understand how fragile life is. Beyond all this political stuff, our patients want to live to see their children get married or have a grandchild. We bleed the same blood. We cry the same tears.”

—Michele Chabin, Religion News Service



■ Standing outside the historic Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, **Yvonne Studevan** was full of pride as she saw her great-great-great-great-grandfather being honored with a new, six-foot bronze statue.

Richard Allen started the nation's first independent black denomination, which celebrated its 200th anniversary at its General Conference in early July. The 2.5-million-member denomination has grown from 16 delegates at its first meeting to 1,506 today.

The statue of Allen gives stature to a man many in the AME Church consider a black founding father, said Studevan, 72, of Athens, Georgia.

"It just dignifies us as a race, as a people, because some people today... still devalue black people," she said. "Some of the issues that Richard Allen faced, we're still facing today."

Allen was also honored this year with a U.S. postage stamp in the Black Heritage series.

A section of the courtyard surrounding the Allen statue includes plaques paying tribute to the nine members of Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina, gunned down during a Bible study a year ago: "May the untimely deaths of these three men and six women be an eternal reminder of the power of love and forgiveness, and that God's grace is sufficient, no matter what."

Studevan, a retired school administrator, hoped the fresh look at the denomination's history may help pass the story along to the younger generation of AME

members. Within minutes of her expressing that hope, a tour guide recounted to a group of teenagers how the walkout from one church led to the creation of their denomination.

Richard Allen started Bethel AME congregation in 1791 after watching white officials of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church pull up his friend, clergyman Absalom Jones, who was praying on his knees.

"The unwillingness of the Methodists to accept the independent leadership of black preachers like Allen and the institution of segregated seating led Allen and Jones to found independent black churches," said Albert J. Raboteau, an American religion historian.

Those independent congregations formed the AME Church in 1816 at a meeting in Philadelphia and elected Allen the first bishop.

The anniversary highlights a legal achievement by a religious organization of African Americans, said Teresa Fry Brown, AME Church historiographer.

"We had to fight all the way to high court," she said of the battle that was resolved by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. "The Methodist Episcopal Church resisted an independent black denomination." —Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

■ **Elie Wiesel**, a Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, died at age 87.

Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial and museum, confirmed July 2 that he died at his home in Manhattan.

As an author, playwright, professor, and speaker, Wiesel dedicated his life to the remembrance of the 6 million Jews and millions of gay and lesbian people, Roma, and others who perished in the Nazi death camps.

"To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time," he wrote in *Night*, which was first published in 1956 and translated into more than 30 languages.

In awarding the Peace Prize in 1986, the Nobel Committee praised Wiesel as a "messenger to mankind" and "one of the most important spiritual leaders and guides

in an age when violence, repression, and racism continue to characterize the world."

Wiesel used his moral authority to call attention to persecuted peoples the world over, including the victims of the war in former Yugoslavia, apartheid in South Africa, the Kurds, victims of famine in Africa, Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, Cambodian refugees, and Argentina's disappeared.

"Sometimes we must interfere: when human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant," Wiesel said. "Whenever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe."

Wiesel's own persecution at the hands of the Nazis began when he was 15, and he and his family were deported from their home in Sighet, Transylvania, to Auschwitz, where his mother and younger sister died. His two older sisters survived.

Toward the end of the war, Wiesel and his father were transferred to another slave labor camp, Buchenwald, where his father was killed.

Those who knew Wiesel personally said he was a somber man. An old friend, Irving Abrahamson, once said of him: "I've never seen Elie give a belly laugh. He'll chuckle, he'll smile, there'll be a twinkle in his eye. But never a laugh from within."

Wiesel moved to New York in 1956. In 1976, Boston University appointed Wiesel as a professor in the humanities, and he taught in the university's religion and philosophy departments.

Bromleigh McClenaghan, a pastor and author in Illinois who took one of Wiesel's classes at Boston University, wrote for the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY*'s website that Wiesel's message was a complicated one.

"Wiesel studied the contours of life and death for victims—but also for perpetrators and the societies that gave rise to them," she wrote. "Under his tutelage, we learned that no one has a monopoly on suffering; our compassion must be for everyone."

While noting his saddened air, she wrote that Wiesel lived in hope of recognizing the causes of genocide and preventing it.

"His hope and conviction continued," she wrote, "even though we continue to fail." —Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service; added source



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PHOTO BY JEFFREY D. STAFFORD FOR THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY

LIVING BY The Word

August 14, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 23:23-28; Luke 12:49-53

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST is not tame, not nice," began the sermon, and then the preacher's voice trembled as he paraphrased Jesus' words: "I have come to bring fire to this earth." Ten years later, I can still hear that tremble—perhaps because the voice belonged to Gordon Lathrop, whose theology I had always regarded as steadfast. Maybe in that moment I imagined a similar tremble in Jesus' voice, not from lack of nerve but from depth of fully human feeling.

Or perhaps I recall Lathrop's voice because it so audibly captured the gravity of Jesus' terrible words. What kind of savior would bring division instead of peace, would deliberately separate family members? What kind of God would bring fire to the earth?

These questions are not merely abstract. Jesus' fire imagery is disturbingly concrete. When I worked as a hospital chaplain I experienced the look and smell of human flesh destroyed by fire. I witnessed the torturous tedium of the layers of healing that happen with human skin, painstakingly slowly, after it has been burned. Nearly every burn victim I came to know addressed, directly and courageously, the question of God's role in causing the fire that harmed them. None found easy answers.

Fire is a dangerous image for Jesus to use, even if he doesn't mean it literally. No wonder his voice trembles, at least in my imaginative rendering of the scene.

What kind of God would bring fire to the earth? Jeremiah offers an answer, albeit a terrifying one in the form of a rhetorical question: "Am I a God near by, says the **LORD**, and not a God far off?" The implied answer is a resounding no. God is far off, so far off that a few verses later Jeremiah proclaims, "Is not my word like fire, says the **LORD**, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" This God is not tame, not nice. Perhaps it's for the best that this God stay far away from us.

But the frightening truth is that God doesn't stay far away. The divine fire and division and hammer are incessantly in our midst. Not always a literal fire that burns forests or flesh. Not the exact social divisions that Jesus predicts, with first-century family members fighting over a controversial religious leader's impact on the norms of their kinship group. Not necessarily a divine hammer that smashes up rocks as a show of power, destroying purely for the sake of destruction. But God's enkindling fire is with us, burning up whatever is harmful or super-

fluous. And God's word hammers away at the hardened structures by which we cause others harm.

Where do we see this burning, this shattering, happening in our own lives and congregations? Where do we think it ought to happen? It's worth naming those things that need to be destroyed in order for new life to grow. Those who feel alienated from institutionalized religion might be particularly adept at such discernment. But it's also God's call to those of us who continue to make up the church.

The presence of God's fire on the earth is cause for fear and trembling, but perhaps also for celebration. There's relief in knowing that the things that are too terrible for us to fix, too unwieldy for us to harness, and too tough for us to eliminate will be taken on by someone far more powerful. One of my divinity school professors used to say wryly, "If we could save ourselves, then the crucifixion was a massive overreaction on God's part." But the crucifixion wasn't an overreaction. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross—the baptism with which he had yet to be baptized when he spoke harshly with the disciples that day, his voice trembling—is in fact the fire that purifies us, the Word that destroys the worst in us, the division that sets us apart from the status quo and calls us continually to be made new.

Jesus calls his listeners hypocrites, claiming that they don't know how to interpret the signs of the times. We may be no better at interpreting our own time. How is God's work mani-

God's fire burns up whatever is harmful or superfluous.

fest among the poor, the despised, the hopeless? How is grace present in the places that most challenge us? What might the gospel mean for those who are hammered or burned by our ways of living?

We don't have all the answers to these questions, except to say that the easiest answer is usually the wrong one—and thus we will always be, in some sense, hypocrites. But we know at least one thing more than Luke's crowds know when they stand face to face with Jesus and hear the tremble in his voice as he predicts his baptism by fire. We know that Jesus' fiery baptism is followed by a resurrection.

Entering into the fire with us, Jesus then emerged from it resurrected. This fact doesn't eliminate the reality of ongoing human suffering, nor does it make God seem any tamer. But it carries us through our own fires with a promise that at the other end is healing and new life. And that, too, is something worth trembling over.

Reflections on the lectionary

August 21, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 13:10-17

IMAGINE THE RELIEF she must feel when, after 18 years stooped over and unable to stand tall, Jesus lifts her out of her illness. And consider how her perspective changes. For the first time in decades, she can look straight into a friend's eye or gaze toward the sky to assess the weather. Her narrowness of vision is instantly broadened. The whole world is now in her line of sight. The unnamed woman's healing in this week's Gospel reading is a story of expansion, revelation, vision widened by grace—a glorious progression toward the life God intends for all of us.

There's more to the story, however. Along with healing the woman, Jesus puts to shame those who rebuke him for healing on the sabbath. This is classic Jesus behavior: lifting up the lowly while knocking the mighty ones down from their thrones, matching a haughty rebuke with a direct and theologically grounded rebuke of his own, turning people's expectations inside out. Grace wins; hypocrisy loses. This story's reversal of fortunes is worthy of our joy, particularly because it allows the crowds in the story to experience God's grace directly through the healing work of Christ. Those who earnestly seek the furthering of God's desires for our broken world may rightly rejoice in the demotion of the haughty.

But such rejoicing can also be driven by *Schadenfreude*, and it can harden into punitive judgment. "Yeah! You tell 'em, Jesus!" easily slips into "Yeah! Let's see 'em suffer!" People we disagree with become enemies to be vanquished. Our vindication requires the punishment of those we deem to be wrong about God, or about how we worship, or about politics. If the elevation of the losers requires the demotion of the winners, we find ourselves on a constantly shifting seesaw of glory and shame. We seek always to be on the side that is rising, with our enemies relegated to the sinking side.

This roots relationships in judgment rather than grace. Of course, there are times when judgment is the most gracious response—times when evil is so blatant that it must be suppressed immediately and at all cost. But such times are rare. Evil is usually subtler. And our desire for enemies to be shamed may be disproportional to the crime. We may not even know who the true enemy is. We may find that there's a bit of enemy in our closest loved ones—and in ourselves. When the seesaw shifts, whoever is on top at that moment may need to be brought down—but not into shame or punishment for its own sake. Reality is more complex than that.

I imagine that when the stooped-over woman stands tall

and takes in the wide world around her, she sees more than just the kind eyes of a friend or fluffy clouds in a bright sky. She also sees the breadth of suffering in her world, the expansive margins that are home to the most vulnerable, and the depth of disease and distress all around her. She sees that she has been raised up into a fallen world. Her widened perspective includes new culpability and new regrets. It requires broader empathy and engagement. Freed from her disease, she is free to serve a world in profound need. Standing tall and facing the world directly, she is now equipped to carry an even heavier cross.

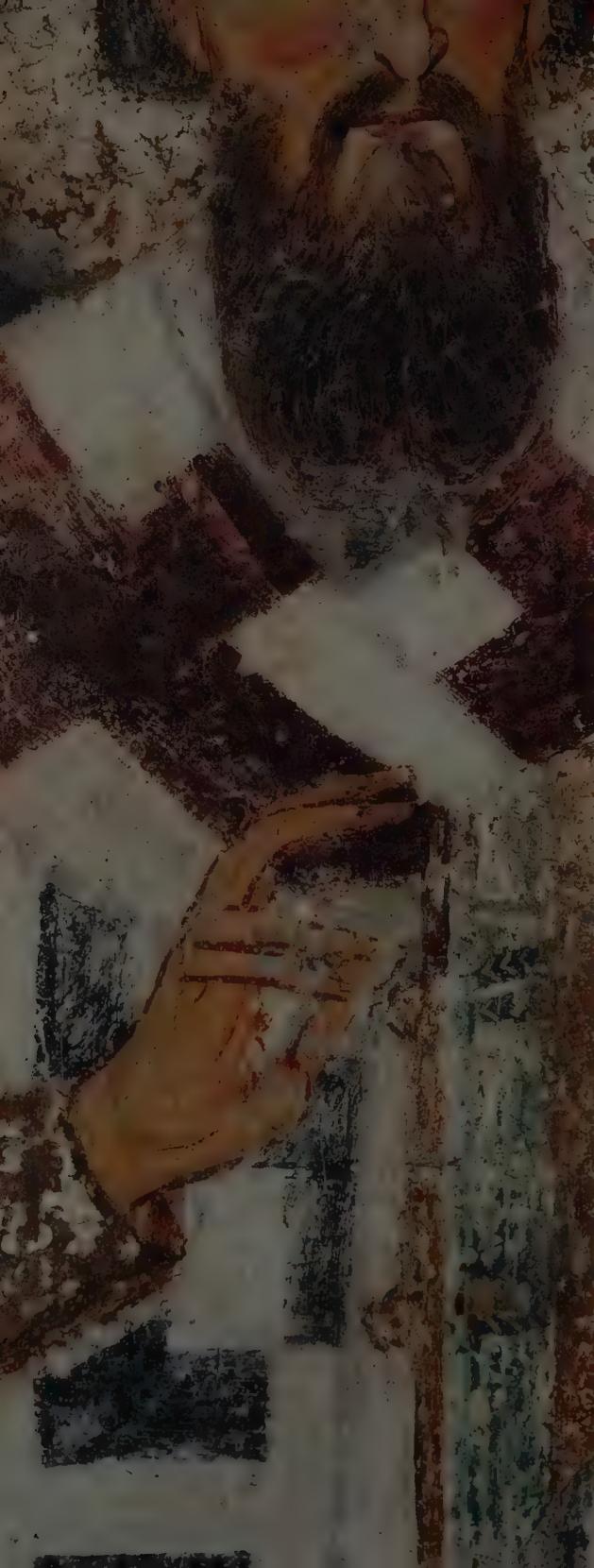
The reality is that we are always being simultaneously stooped down and lifted up. That's not a bad thing. It follows the example that Jesus sets for us—his exaltation is a crucifixion, and his glory is in being weighted down with shame. As Jesus' disciples, we too bear the responsibility of letting ourselves be stooped down under the cross of Christ, even as God's grace continually lifts us up.

What does it mean for us to be both uplifted in glory and stooped down in humility? It may mean declining to wish terrible things upon the public figures who make ignorant comments about immigrants, and instead working to bring those immigrants into a more just relationship with the political and economic systems from which we profit. It may mean letting go of our deeply held convictions about the right way to worship or vote or live, instead listening for the whisperings of the Spirit—even if that whispering comes in the voice of someone we don't like. It may mean changing our perspective so that the person we regarded as an enemy now looks like a child of God.

Reading this healing story, our tendency is to side with Jesus and the woman and the crowds, and against Jesus' opponents, even to be glad about their shame. After all, they are wrong! Jesus is right: when someone is suffering, healing is more important than the letter of the law. Worship is at its best when it transforms us and lifts us into new life, not when it maintains the status quo.

But perhaps instead of rejoicing in one person's exaltation over the other, we could simply aim for kindness and healing in this complex, broken world, where everyone needs simultaneously to be exalted and humbled. Perhaps grace could replace judgment in our assessment of those who appear to be our opponents. Rather than aiming to be lifted up while our enemies are stooped down, perhaps we could focus on seeing what God reveals to us no matter where our gaze is aimed, no matter how tall we stand. When we notice the person next to us stooped down, we might take on some of her burden without judging her worthiness. Perhaps that's where the real healing begins.

The author is Elizabeth Palmer, books editor for the CENTURY.



WHEN CHURCH MEMBERS
PREFER JUST A BLESSING

Take and eat?

by Heidi Haverkamp

MATT MOVED BACK HOME

when a job in another state didn't work out. Soon he was attending worship regularly with his parents at the small Episcopal church I served at the time. One evening I met him for coffee. We had an intense conversation about theology, the Bible, and why young adults don't attend church.

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Not long after that conversation, Matt appeared one Sunday at the altar but didn't put his hands out to receive communion. Instead, his arms were crossed over his chest—the posture one assumes when asking to receive a blessing. This was unusual, but I put my hand on his head, said a blessing, and thought no more about it.

When Matt continued to do this Sunday after Sunday, however, I began to worry. Why wasn't he receiving communion? Was he in spiritual crisis? I waited a few months, trying not to overreact, before writing him an e-mail to ask about it.

He replied quickly: "I actually just love receiving a blessing each week. Something about being prayed upon is really comforting to me. Every so often, I will get communion, but for me, I get a lot more out of a blessing!"

I was taken aback. Matt's not an uninitiated seeker; he grew up in the Episcopal Church. And ours is a tradition that places the Eucharist at the very center of spiritual practice. I became an Episcopalian because I felt a deep spiritual need for the Eucharist on a weekly basis. Yet Matt "gets a lot more out of a blessing"? I would have felt more comfortable if he had confessed to me a terrible sin.

To make things worse, in a follow-up conversation with Matt I learned that I was in fact personally responsible for the seemingly effortless way he declined the sacrament. Every Sunday in our parish, I welcomed anyone who wanted to know Jesus Christ to meet him in the Eucharist. Every Sunday, I also acknowledged anyone who did not feel that call. "You are welcome to *not* take communion," I said. "You are welcome to come up for a blessing instead." I had never considered that church members might also hear this as an invitation to choose a blessing. Matt did, and he told me how much he appreciated being offered the option.

Coincidentally, the same night I talked to Matt, my inquirers' class was scheduled to discuss the Eucharist. I asked the class members what they thought about Matt's preference for a blessing rather than communion—and two of the six agreed with him! I felt queasy. Can baptized Christians really understand communion as optional, something to forego on a regular basis? Does enabling this practice constitute too much eucharistic hospitality on my part? I worried that I had failed, as their priest, to communicate the significance of what was being offered to them at God's table.

Later, I sat down with a few of my parishioners to try to understand. Jeanette—who often asked for a blessing instead of Eucharist, though not as frequently as Matt—said that communion is "like I'm taking in a part of Jesus and being cleaned from anything bad. Taking him in clears everything for me." Blessing, on the other hand, "is like a big hug!" When she's having a difficult time emotionally, she says, "a blessing is my quiet way of feeling God's embrace."

Ken, who grew up Lutheran, doesn't find communion to be the most meaningful part of worship and has thought about asking for a blessing instead. He has felt too self-conscious to do it. However, sometimes after receiving the Eucharist he goes to the healing ministers, who lay hands on his shoulders and pray for him aloud by name. This gives him "a physical feeling," he says. It "makes me feel different; it feels like a warmth"—for him, more powerful than receiving communion.

Donna told me she could not imagine choosing a blessing instead of the Eucharist. She grew up Episcopalian, although she went decades without attending church regularly. Now that she has returned, the Eucharist "is the ultimate to me. Receiving communion is the blessing! Ingesting [Jesus]: it doesn't get any stronger than that. I'm allowed to partake of his body and blood—that's huge."

I never considered that a parishioner might choose a blessing over communion.

I asked my Facebook network about the practice of opting for a blessing instead of communion in other churches. One person said, "As a person who grew up outside of a eucharistic tradition, 'laying on hands' and prayer are often more meaningful for me on a deep soul level." Another: "As a parent of a small child I have had Sundays when I was too angry and frustrated to receive by the time communion was served." People told me they've chosen a blessing because of a food allergy, an upset stomach, or discomfort with a celebrant. Others said they refrain from communion when they are angry, unable to forgive someone, or otherwise feeling unfit to receive. I couldn't find much evidence, however, that large numbers of Christians prefer to receive a blessing instead of the sacrament on a regular basis.

With parishioners like Matt and Jeanette, I felt caught between two pastoral roles: host at God's table and teacher of Christian discipleship. I want to welcome people to meet Christ wherever they are, but does that mean welcoming people to the Eucharist merely according to their preference?

The *mandatum* of Maundy Thursday traditionally refers to Jesus' command to love one another. Yet Jesus' grammar at the Last Supper is hard to mistake: *Take, eat. Drink from it. Do this.* These are commands; Jesus is not inviting his disciples to participate if they feel so moved. Clearly, receiving communion regularly is crucial to life in Christ.

Still, I probably will not start saying, "Jesus commanded it, so you all better get yourselves up here." After all, when Paul addresses the subject of communion participation in 1 Corinthians 11, he doesn't seem any more worried about people choosing not to receive than he is about the wrong people receiving. He's upset about something else: receiving without acknowledging the presence of the community. There cannot be some going hungry at the meal while others are drunk (11:21). Communion is not about insiders and outsiders. Paul explains that it is the gravest of sins to "eat and drink without discerning the body"—the body of Christ present in the bread and wine, and the body of Christ present among the people gathered (11:29).

Matt wasn't going hungry or getting drunk, but I wonder whether he felt part of the community at our parish. His life had been interrupted, and he found a haven with us for a while. But he was one of only a few young adults and simultaneously

attending worship and classes at two other churches. (He has since joined his fiancée's church.) "It may be that I feel it's something different from the rest of the congregation, to ask for a blessing," he said to me at one point. "I wonder—but no, I don't think so." While he quickly backed off that hunch, it sounded about right to me.

Receiving communion is in part a personal experience. People may prefer a certain kind of bread, wine or juice, sipping or intinction; they may have good reason to choose to abstain sometimes. But communion is also *communal*: we receive as the body of Christ, a shared action larger than individual preference. "Be what you see," said Augustine in a sermon on the Eucharist, "receive what you are." The congregation becomes the body of Christ by receiving. For whatever reason, someone may opt out in favor of a blessing—perhaps feeling lost, confused, or angry. Such a choice signifies standing apart from this mystical and communal wholeness in Christ.

This doesn't mean that it's an act of rejection or arrogance. It's a choice that can be made with great integrity. Christ welcomes Matt, Jeanette, and anyone else who approaches his table—whether or not they receive him that day in the form of bread and wine. Surely, receiving a blessing is as receptive and vulnerable a gesture as open palms. To want a human touch or a hug from God is not a rejection of Christ's sacrifice; it is an acknowledgment of need and the desire for acceptance.

In the Gospels, Jesus welcomes Nicodemus's questions under cover of night, welcomes a shamed and lonely woman's conversation at a well, and welcomes Judas's company at the Last Supper. "Love bade me welcome," writes George Herbert, "yet my soul drew back." Even when we are unable or unwilling to believe we are part of the body, God comes to meet us—even at the threshold, if we can't quite sit and eat. CC



WHY AND HOW I BLESS MY CHILDREN

Blest and kept

by Steve Thorngate

Idling for one minute only

Here is a sign that surely reflects
the Puritan heritage of our college.

For though it is meant for the coaches

that pull up to the curb, disbursing
limbs of basketball players

who loiter at the back of the gym,

I always think it applies to me,
standing here in the new warmth

of the winter sun, watching

the first green tips of grass emerge
from the dampness of the ground.

Paul Willis

MY SIBLINGS and I have a special fondness for Peter Lutkin's classic setting of the *Numbers* blessing. We all sang it in high school choir; now we sing it together at family weddings and funerals and occasionally when we're just sitting around. Most of us know at least one voice part by heart. We're shakier, however, on the words. We know them all, we just get confused about the order. When exactly does the Lord be gracious unto you, as opposed to giving you peace?

It took me years to realize where this confusion comes from: Lutkin sets the biblical text out of order. That's a problem for us, because Numbers 6:24-26 itself lives even deeper in our bones than Lutkin's music does. This text's role in our childhood is both the reason we love the choral setting and the reason we're thrown off by its rather minor liberties with the text.

My parents prayed with us a lot when we were little. We were Baptists turned nondenominational, so we rarely used precomposed texts; the Numbers blessing was the major exception. Most nights, after we were fed and bathed and jammed and tucked in, my dad went from bed to bed, put his hand on our heads, and blessed us. He took his own liberties with the text by mixing translations:

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace, both now and always. Amen.

I can still hear his voice—his singer's flair for the alliteration of “the Lord lift the light,” his slight elongation of *liiight*, the way he landed on *peace* and then paused, as if having peace not just now but always were the icing on the cake.

I never consciously planned to continue this practice, but when my first daughter was born it seemed the thing to do. Now she's two, and it's an established part of her bedtime routine, something she reminds me to do if I forget. Not that she reliably appreciates the blessing—half the time she squirms and resists it, or tries to negotiate for a song or a story instead. Yet she's decided that *peace* and *amen* are her lines, not just mine, and when we get to those parts she invariably stops fighting it and chimes in. (I bless her baby sister, too; that girl's still all grins and coos.)

The first time I did this, I hesitated at the word *his*. Did I really want to establish a pattern of invoking a male God's blessing on my little girl every day, exclusively? Maybe I needed to choose another translation. I didn't have a parallel Bible handy, so I mentally flagged the question for later—and proceeded to forget about it each day till I was standing there in the dark with her, saying *his* again. The pattern took hold.

I soon articulated a couple of reasons I was hesitant to stray from it. I was eager for my dad to be the one to bless his granddaughter whenever they were together, and I didn't want her to think he was doing it wrong. Also, I'm a big proponent of expansive rather than inclusive language for God, of making the list of acceptable words longer, not shorter—and I knew our family would embrace the divine feminine in other prayers, at other times. Mostly I just didn't want the blessing to be any different from the way I remembered it.

This connection to my dad's exact words is also why I didn't like the idea of starting each sentence with the word *may*. In the world of higher-church Lutherans and Episcopalians I now inhabit, that would be the theologically scrupulous way for a layperson like me to do it: an ordained minister pronounces God's blessing directly (“The Lord bless . . .”); the rest of us merely request it (“May the Lord bless . . .”). This is one of

those things a lot of us speak of in a half-joking, mildly embarrassed tone. We know it sounds a little bizarre to Christians in less highly ordered traditions, where the laity are presumably blessing one another willy-nilly.

We also know that the principle here, the priestly declaration of God's blessing, is integral to our theology and practice. And such principles matter. They certainly matter to me, a clergy spouse who believes deeply in my wife's gifts for her particular ministry “to bless and declare pardon in the name of God,” as the Book of Common Prayer puts it. Still, they aren't the only thing that matters, and it's hard to imagine the illicit blessing of children ranking high on anyone's list of challenges facing the church.

It was not high on my wife's list. When our first child was born, Nadia was in the process of becoming a priest. I was self-conscious about the patriarchal implications of presuming the authority to bless my daughter by invoking God and “his countenance,” so I asked Nadia what she thought. Did she want to do the blessing instead? She responded wryly that I should do it, since she wasn't ordained yet. Would I say *may*? she wondered, more curious than concerned. Probably not, I said. Partly because I read a lot of writing by pastors, which has cultivated an allergy to preacher tics like *may we*. Primarily, once again, because of my dad's voice ringing verbatim in my ears.

I decided to bless my daughters with the same words my dad had used to bless me.

The grammar of a blessing, the gender of a pronoun—both *may* and *his* are three-letter words that point to bigger questions about, among other things, tradition. In my dad's church circles, a high value is placed on the heritage of exclusively male language for God—a heritage I see as mostly harmful. In my circles, there is a high value on distinctions between the ministries of layperson, deacon, presbyter, and bishop—distinctions that don't mean much in my dad's nondenominational context. These are both legitimate yet contested appeals to Christian tradition, two very different sorts of traditionalism.

Are they the same tradition? The question looms large for me. I bless my daughters because my dad blessed me; I'm carrying on a tradition in the practice of faith. And while such a blessing is an audacious invocation of the divine, at another level it's just one of many little things parents might do to try to form their children in something resembling their own faith. My parents' considerable efforts on this front have met varying results. Among their offspring, Christianity is expressed as conservative and liberal, high church and low, committed and ambivalent and strictly cultural. (There are a lot of us.) I'm the comparatively liberal, high church, committed one. Did my parents successfully pass their faith on to me? That depends on how broadly you define it.

What I know is that I feel the gift of my father's blessing.

Much of my spiritual formation and vocabulary were shaped by my upbringing; other parts were shaped in reaction against it. I don't think my dad consciously chose to bless both sides of this coin. I do think it happened anyway. Blessing is like that: it's bigger than our intentions, far bigger than our factional loyalties and opinions. My dad has given me no reason to suspect that our theological differences make him want to revoke or revise his blessing. But it's worth noting the biblical witness on this point: he couldn't do it if he tried. A blessing has its own power, whether or not the blesser agrees wholeheartedly with every word of it—or with what the blessed goes on to do with it.

In a time of deep anxiety about Christians' ability to pass on the faith, I've come to see the act of blessing a child as a gesture of trust. I'm not asking God to make sure my daughters agree with me on the nature of salvation or the priorities of Christian ethics. I'm not asking God to protect them from fundamentalism, decision theology, or showboating praise bands. I'm not even asking God to prevent them from becoming doubters or spiritual dabblers or outright nones. No, I'm invoking God's promise to bless and keep them—on God's terms, not mine. I'm acknowledging that they belong to a gracious God whose face doesn't need my help to shine upon them.

I do this using the words my dad used, whatever my quibbles about saying *his* and not saying *may*, because I cherish and trust the gift enough to simply pass it on as is. My two-year-old recently started helping me bless her little sister. When it's her turn, I bless her and she blesses me right back: though she continues to resist the thing, she also keeps chiming in on *peace* and *amen*, affirming these ancient and powerful words right through her ambivalence. I do the same.

A few hours after Nadia was ordained a priest, she and I were putting the girls to bed. "Hey," I said, in that half-joking tone we use to discuss rubrics and canons, "you can give the blessing now!" She just smiled and said, "So can you." CC



THE RARE BLESSING OF A BLESSING

Worth the wait

by Joanna Harader

AS A CHILD IN CHURCH,

I sat through the organ hymns and incomprehensible sermons, my scrawny backside squirming on the hard pew. I followed the order of worship in the bulletin, mentally checking off each item. My eyes were on the prize: the benediction. I loved the benediction because it meant that the service was over. I could get up, talk to my friends, and then go to Grandpa's house for lunch.

Joanna Harader is pastor at Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas.

The other annunciation

What if there was another girl
To whom the angel did not come,
One who said, every day, "I am ready."
She woke, she dressed, she went to the well
to draw water.

Still no flutter of wings
No gifts delivered in the dark.
No sudden lights.
Just ordinary grit and labor.

She knew the stories—Samuel, Miriam.
The power of, "Here I am."
She wiped sleep from her eyes.
Readied the day. Waited.

Amy Frykholm

As a pastor, I still love the benediction. I won't lie: it's still partly because it signals the end of worship and an impending meal. But that's no longer the only reason. I realize now how unique these words of blessing are in a world where words swirl around us all the time—words spoken and sung and written, words from the mouths of friends and strangers and people on television, words on pages and billboards and screens.

Many of these words are aimed at getting us to do things. Advertisements want us to buy products; spouses want us to take out the trash. Other words give us information. Probably too much information—about the stock market and the latest police shooting and political instability in the Middle East and the recent celebrity wedding. Some of it we want to know; some of it we should know; some of it just takes up valuable psychic space.

It's rare to hear words that don't aim to do anything but offer a blessing.

There are hostile words out there, too—words that accuse and condemn and berate and scold. People claim power with these acidic words; they make money from them; they run for office with them. There are also lovely words that share stories and open up our spirits and connect us with one another. And there are words that make us laugh.

We do not suffer from a lack of words. But it is rare, at least in my experience, to receive words of pure blessing. For most people, worship is the unique space where they can hear such words—words that do not ask them to do anything, offer new information, point out problems or distract from them. Worship is the sacred space of words that simply bless.

Even in worship, we have to wait for it. All through the service I speak words, words, and more words: ancient words from scripture and announcements about the upcoming week, words of prayer and of proclamation, scripted words and off-the-cuff ones. I speak words for the children, for the adults, and for God; some of the words I speak are probably just for myself.

Then, finally, we stand. And we receive—or we are lucky enough to give—a blessing. These final holy words are part prayer, asking God to be with each person. They are part reminder: God is, in fact, with us. They are part longing, speaking aloud the reality we want to be true. They are mere words, but they are necessary and powerful words.

Children know the power of a blessing. One Sunday during children's time, I simply offered a blessing to each child who gathered up at the front of the sanctuary. I placed my hand on each head, one at a time: "Lisa, know that God loves you now and always." There were about a dozen children that morning, and I had never seen them so focused and still. There was no fidgeting or whispering, just waiting and absorbing: "God loves you now and always."

We adults could take a lesson from the children about how to receive a blessing. Every once in awhile I try to help the adults get there. I say a few words before the benediction: "This blessing is a gift. Let these words settle into you. Carry these words with you—because you just might need these words in the midst of all the other words that will bombard you this week."

Sometimes there is a moment when we adults kind of get it. But mostly we aren't as comfortable as the children are with words that demand nothing of us and take nothing from us. We are not well practiced at simply basking in the love God wishes to pour out upon us through the words of benediction. No, we adults are not baskers.

And we adults know a blessing is not a magic spell. Saying "peace" does not make a teenager stop fighting with her parents. Saying "joy" does not erase the grief of a father's death. The word *hope* does not automatically lift the spirits of a woman who has been unemployed for eight months. The benediction does not offer an easy fix to our problems. But it reminds us of the presence of God and our faith community, and this reminder helps. Having these good words to carry with us through the week—sometimes this helps, just a little.

At least once a week we have the opportunity to receive these sacred words that provide just a bit of shelter from all the other words swirling around us. It is a privilege to hear them and a deeper privilege to speak them over people we love: the Sunday school teacher who brought her class into worship late because they had been down at the river looking for rocks and bugs. The 80-year-old woman who dances at our church talent shows. The young couple whose baby will be born any day now. The teenager about to graduate and move away. The man just diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His wife.

The benediction signals that church is done and lunch is close at hand. It is also a deep gift: offered through the flawed and sacred worshiping body, given and received with holy gratitude.

CC

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I planned a service for students. None came.

Failure to launch

by Mark Yaconelli

THE ADVERTISEMENT in our church newsletter was simple and straightforward. “We need someone to direct the college prayer service.” I’d spent two years as a parishioner of the 250-member church and was looking for a way to serve. As a veteran youth worker, a retreat leader, and author of four books on prayer and ministry, I felt like the ad was directed at me.

I met with the pastor, and she informed me that the church had received a grant to develop a service that would attract students from Southern Oregon University, a school with over 5,000 students, conveniently located just across the street. I told the pastor about my experience in developing prayer services for youth and adults. I showed her my books, told her about the research I’d done in spiritual formation, prayer, and ministry. She was impressed and gave me the volunteer position. I was ecstatic.

Over the next month I bought hundreds of candles, built and painted a six-foot cross, collected baskets of river stones, and designed and printed song sheets. I recruited and trained a trio of local musicians (violin, piano, and guitar) in various chants from Taizé, Iona, and other contemplative communities. I found three elderly church members to prepare a simple supper to serve the students after the service. I designed a logo, gave the service a religiously ambiguous title (“Thirst”), and put ads in the college newspaper. I then met with the college chaplain and various faculty members and asked them to help spread the word about the new service. Finally, I met with student groups, mailed letters to students who had identified themselves as interested in Christianity, and ate lunch each day on campus. In all my publicity I emphasized the service would provide free dinner and comfort for stressed-out students.

The night before the service I couldn’t sleep. I had visions of undergraduates, weary and lost, showing up for the service. I thought about the conversations I would initiate once the service ended. I began to dream about a campus Bible study or maybe a theological reflection group. I imagined taking a core group of students on a service trip to Mexico during the spring recess. The possibilities were endless. I was excited to see what God would do.

I showed up three hours before our first service. I helped prepare soup and then set up the chapel. I removed the front pews, placed the large wooden cross on the floor, filled metal trays with sand and primitive clay bowls with water and float-

ing candles, set out fresh flowers, and placed warm-colored icons at the perimeter. I then sat in the chapel and prayed. I’d been praying for the service all along, but tonight I wanted extra time to pray. I sat by the cross, lit a candle, and in silence I asked God to bless the service. I prayed for the students, prayed that all my work would bear fruit in the lives of the students. My heart filled with a quiet joy as I sat in the chapel, grateful for the work that God was doing, grateful that I had been called to serve such a beautiful vision.

Fifteen minutes before the service began I lit the candles around the chapel, opened the front doors of the church, picked up a handful of the service bulletins, and stood at the church entrance. Immediately, I saw a group of 15 students walk across the street from the university. I smiled with

Expectations in life often arise from two distracting energies: worry and fantasy.

warmth and gratitude as the students stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the church. They looked at me, a young woman waved, and then they turned and walked to the nearby grocery store. I stood and watched as various students passed by on the sidewalk, some glancing at me with curiosity, most oblivious to me and the publicized prayer service. At five minutes past the designated hour, I walked inside. There were the three musicians at the back of the room, the pastor, the three elderly women who fixed the evening meal, and me. That was it. Two months of work and prayer and preparation, and not one student.

If I ever become an actor and have a scene where I need to make myself cry, it will be easy. I’ll only need to think of that first college prayer service. It was the saddest service I’ve ever witnessed—and I don’t mean Jesus in Gethsemane praying “I am sorrowful unto death” kind of sad. I mean more like over-

*Mark Yaconelli is a spiritual director, storyteller, community activist, and executive director of the Hearth Community. This essay is excerpted from his book *The Gift of Hard Things*. © 2016 by Mark Yaconelli. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press.*

weight middle-aged white man at an Usher concert dancing “I am a sex machine” kind of sad.

Midway through the service the bulletin instructed participants to come forward and pray around the large cross that lay on the floor. There were baskets of candles so that after people knelt down, they could light a candle and place it in one of the sand trays along the edge of the cross. When the moment arrived the three elderly women stood up. All three of them were well into their seventies, but they liked me and wanted to support the service, so they walked forward. There was a long, anxious pause as the three women stopped at the foot of the cross and contemplated the distance to the floor. Finally, one woman gripped the arms of her two companions and carefully lowered herself into a half-squat. She paused for a few seconds, then suddenly released her hands and fell back with a hard thump onto the carpeted floor. “My goodness!” she cried out. *God help us!* I thought to myself.

The second woman walked to the left side of the wooden cross, stretched her arms out and bent at the waist with her knees locked. She tilted forward until her hands struck the floor. Now in an upside-down V, the woman stretched out her legs and began to walk her fingers forward. But her arms suddenly gave out, and she collapsed face down on the floor. Alarmed, the third woman hurried to help her prostrate friend, but she tripped on the candle basket and crumpled over on top

of her. All of this took place while the pastor, the three musicians, and I chanted, “Stay with me, remain here with me, watch and pray. Watch and pray.”

For the next nine months I led the weekly college prayer service. Not one college student ever attended. Not one. I spent hundreds of hours visiting the campus, tacking up flyers, placing ads in the college paper, and meeting student groups, but not one student ever walked across the street—not even for the free postservice dinner (which we eventually stopped serving).

My life has never matched my expectations. Never. Sometimes life exceeds my expectations, other times it falls short; more often life does something unusual, unexpected, unpredictable, something that renders my expectations absurd. I often find myself living within a world of expectations—the expectations of family, pastors, neighbors, and the surrounding culture. The most damning expectations, however, come from deep within, goading me, judging me, criticizing me for falling short.

Expectations in ministry and life often arise from two distracting energies: worry and fantasy. Anxious expectations are grounded in our fear of failure. They are nurtured by the belief that our accomplishments determine our value and worth. This is the message in our secular culture, and this is frequently the driving force within most Christians. Some voice inside of us

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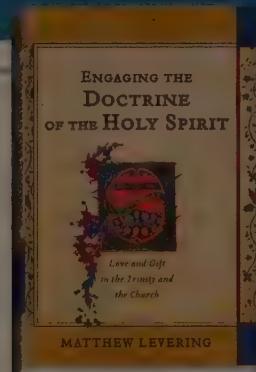
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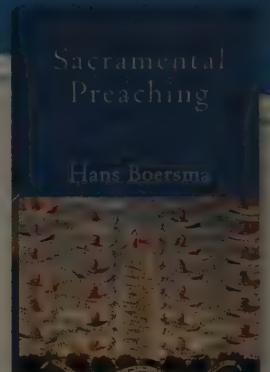
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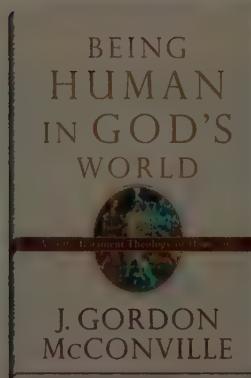
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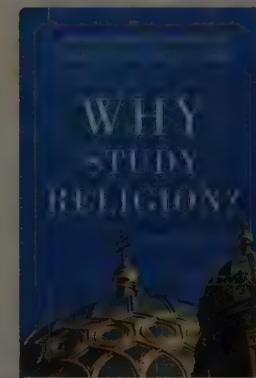
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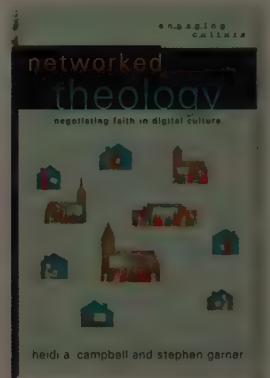
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tells us that faithful people are successful. Deep down we believe that if we pray, follow the Ten Commandments, and work hard, God will grant us a successful life. When our lives fail to match our expectations, we get anxious, work harder, and worry more. Eventually God moves to the margin of our lives.

Expectations are also built out of fantasy. The spiritual life is hard. There are few tangible rewards. It's much more pleasurable to dream of social justice, to talk of serving the poor, than to actually do it.

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, an elderly monk, a wise man named Father Zossima, converses with a wealthy woman. The woman is in anguish about the existence of God. The wise elder tells her that only by acts of love will she be able to know God. "Try to love your neighbors, love them actively and unceasingly. And as you learn to love them more and more, you will be more and more convinced of the existence of God and of the immortality of your own soul."

In following Jesus, we learn to let go of our expectations of God and ourselves.

At first Zossima's words comfort the woman. She confesses she often imagines giving away her wealth in order to live a life of poverty and service to the poor. She tells the father that this image often brings her tears of joy. But then, as she entertains the fantasy of a life of Christian service, she worries that the people she would serve would be unappreciative of her sacrifice and efforts. She realizes she would be unable to tolerate ingratitude. "I want to be praised and paid for love with love." And so her dream of serving others dies and she continues to wonder if God exists.

How do we live with the great disappointment of Christian living? How do we continue to serve when our lives don't match our expectations? What do we do when our efforts, our commitment to Jesus, our prayers and spiritual yearnings don't pay off? During the nine months that I directed the college prayer service, I began to read the Gospels—paying special attention to the disciples' experience. I began to feel the confusion, helplessness, frustration, anxiety, fear, and even ambivalence the disciples often experienced. For the disciples Jesus was often a bewildering disappointment. He acted in ways that seemed completely unproductive compared to the disciples' expectations. In the final interaction between Jesus and his followers (Acts 1) you can sense their disappointment. Still expecting Jesus to overthrow the Roman oppressors, the disciples ask, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responds, "It is not for you to know." He ascends, and the disciples depart, still unclear of what the future will bring.

Again and again the disciples are forced to give up their expectations and remain in a state of spiritual poverty. To enter into spiritual poverty is to keep from seeking to possess or con-

trol God. Spiritual poverty is the willingness to be empty, to allow our expectations of God to dissipate. Like those who followed Jesus, it's a willingness to be helpless, confused, anxious, and wanting. It's a willingness to enter the void, the uncertainty that so many people, particularly the poor, live with every day. It's a willingness to allow God to be God and me to be me. It's only in this empty and vulnerable state that we become available to the God who lives in the present moment, the God who lives in our immediate relationships, and the God who lives within the small acts of love that we are asked to undertake.

Over nine months the college prayer service grew to about 30 souls—still mostly women over 60 years old. In the spring, one month before the service was going to break for the summer, I met with the pastor and resigned my position. I felt like a failure. One month later Kim, the pianist from the prayer service I had hired from a music school, asked to meet with me. She told me her story. It was a heartbreak history of abuse, betrayal, grief, and sorrow.

When she finished she told me, "I don't know anything about religion. I don't know anything about God, but I heard you were quitting the prayer service, and I wanted to thank you for what you've done because it is the only thing I've looked forward to each week. I want to become a Christian, even though I don't know what that means. And I wanted to ask if you would be my sponsor."

Three years later the "college prayer service" continues. Every Tuesday night somewhere between 15 and 30 people gather to sing and pray, sit in silence, and listen to scripture. The heavy wooden cross has been replaced with a table cross so that the elderly folks can light candles without kneeling on the floor. In the back of the room sit the same three musicians I hired three years ago. The violinist frequents our church retreats and youth programs; the guitarist, having suffered a painful divorce, often comes to a weekly Christian meditation group; and Kim the pianist now leads the Sunday morning music.

We minister because we want to know love; we want to live love. To live a life of love is to trust what we're given more than what we give. The Christian path is a commitment to practicing the art of love, learning the dimensions and character of love—its boundless depth, its endless horizon. On the Christian path we are learning to let go of our expectations—expectations of ourselves, of God, of others. We are learning to live in spiritual poverty, to be empty, open, helpless, uncertain, so we might be available to God's hidden, humble work.

When the wealthy woman in *The Brothers Karamazov* admits she can't serve God if her service will be unappreciated, Father Zossima responds,

A true act of love, unlike imaginary love, is hard and forbidding. . . . [It] requires hard work and patience, and for some, it is a whole way of life. But I predict that at the very moment when you see despairingly that, despite all your efforts, you have not only failed to come closer to your goal but, indeed, seem even farther from it than ever—at that very moment, you will have achieved your goal and will recognize the miraculous power of our Lord, who has always loved you and has secretly guided you all along.

Speaking of the cross

by Charles Hefling

IF CHRISTIAN LANGUAGE is Christian just insofar as it takes its bearings from Jesus Christ, then there is a sense in which everything Christians say is Christology or Christ-talk—even when Christ is not being mentioned. Taken in that ample sense, Christology would embrace the whole gamut of topics that are usually discussed in Christian dogmatics or systematic theology. Such is Ingolf Dalferth's impressive enterprise in *Crucified and Resurrected*. The “grammar” of Christology in his subtitle applies to discourse about God and God's Trinity, to pneumatology and eschatology, and in the last quarter of the book to salvation and in particular the “saving significance” of the cross.

This last, lengthy chapter, “Atoning Sacrifice,” invites comparison with Stephen Finlan's *Sacrifice and Atonement*. In some ways the two could not be more different. Dalferth writes as a philosophical theologian in a grand, heavyweight Germanic manner. Finlan is primarily a biblical scholar, a teacher, and an American—eclectic, cut-to-the-chase, and at times colloquial. Yet they share a common concern: they concur that the more or less standard way in which Western Christianity has understood and spoken of Christ's death is very problematic.

Dalferth addresses the problem in the context of his more comprehensive project. The comprehensiveness is not optional; a more restricted approach could not do justice to the subject matter of Christian language, which is a complex, interconnected whole. The “grammatical” rules that govern talk about the Spirit, for example, can be understood only in relation to proper speech about humankind, which itself is bound up with the right way to speak of creation and of God as creator. In turn, this overall regulative coherence registers the fact that all genuinely Christian speech derives from one and the same confessional affirmation: God raised Jesus from the dead.

Not that this origenerative declaration is a premise from which correctly formulated statements about God's Trinity, say, or about the identity of Christ can be deduced logically. Theology has an intelligibility and in that sense a logic, yet it is not a *logos*, a philosophy, a theoretical or rational “science.” To suppose otherwise has been Scholasticism's big mistake. Theologians do well to keep in mind that what is spoken in confessing Christ's resurrection is divine activity, and that the epistemic counterpart to acts of God is not informative cognition but justifying faith.



**Crucified and Resurrected:
Restructuring the Grammar of Christology**
By Ingolf U. Dalferth
Baker Academic, 352 pp., \$45.00

**Sacrifice and Atonement:
Psychological Motives and Biblical Patterns**
By Stephen Finlan
Fortress, 224 pp., \$39.00 paperback

But jumping overboard on the other side is a mistake too. If for Dalferth theology is not *logos*, neither is it *mythos*. To insist that faith plays an intrinsic part in properly Christian discourse is not to advocate floundering in a flood of aestheticism, poetic fancy, and narrative imagination. Dalferth does at times privilege image over concept, but the “mythical” mode of thought and speech as such is no more theologically appropriate than “logical” reasoning. Both have been superseded. They belong to a former age, an old world that comes to an end with the eschatological advent of God's saving presence, which is realized in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and heralded by “the word of the cross.” In other words, theological talk is unique. Christians may perhaps use the same words as everyone else, but the way they use them exemplifies a grammar that is one of a kind.

Insofar as the rules of Christian speech are already latent or implicit in properly formed talk about Christ and the God who raised him, one might expect that “restructuring the grammar of Christology” would entail clarifications and corrections of existing language rather than startling innovations. By and large, Dalferth meets that expectation. Take, for example, the old rule of thumb known as the *communicatio idiomatum*, which is a handy way to make sure that statements about Christ keep within the boundaries set at the Council of Chalcedon. What is it fitting and proper to say about somebody who is truly God, truly a human being, and yet truly one and the same? The traditional rule for discriminating between right

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and wrong statements remains as valid as ever. What changes is the reason *why* it is valid. For Dalferth, Christians do not say what they do about Christ because he can be described by using borrowed philosophical apparatus to assign precise meanings to particular words like *person* and *nature* that happen to have been used at Chalcedon. Such technical definitions are beside the point, because describing the divine is not what theology does. Theological statements affirm God's self-communication by clarifying that God is understood (if at all) in the way he has made himself understood, namely, in the word that mediates Jesus' resurrection.

Does salvation need to be detached from crucifixion?

Or take God's Trinity. The self-differentiation of God that is implicit in his raising of Jesus leads Dalferth to an account of divine plurality that is recognizably continuous with Western trinitarian theology, while at the same time it obviates a lot of recent hand-wringing about an "immanent" and an "economic" Trinity that may or may not be describing the same thing.

For the most part, then, Dalferth's restructured grammar does not require Christian speakers to speak otherwise than has been their custom. But when it comes to what they say about the cross, his argument takes a somewhat different turn. It has been standard procedure in Christian dogmatics to distinguish between the "person" of Christ (who he is) and his "office" or work (what he does). To the latter belongs the creedal statement that he was crucified "for us" or "for our sake." Dalferth has not much use for the conventional distinction, but he follows the conventional order inasmuch as his book ends with soteriology. The concluding chapter turns on one basic question: How far is it appropriate to conceive the for-us-ness of Christ's death in terms of sacrifice and atonement? The answer turns out to be "not very far."

Finlan's more radical answer would be "not at all." But he shares with Dalferth some basic points of reference from which a conversation could begin. In particular, they agree that:

- (1) The theological tradition in question begins in the New Testament, on which any critical investigation must therefore be focused.
- (2) From that standpoint, to all relevant intents and purposes, "sacrifice" and "atonement" coincide.

There may be a stratum of Hebrew scripture where not every sacrifice is regarded as an atoning act—a performance that compensates somehow for past wrongdoing—but by New Testament times it was generally held that all kinds of sacrifice are offered to make atonement. The language of sacrifice, so construed, is employed in various ways by various New Testament authors to explain the savingness of the cross. Christ's death saves because it atones, and it atones inasmuch as it is a sacrifice.

- (3) Such an understanding of how Christ's death benefits others is by no means the only way in which the New Testament speaks of salvation. It did give rise to the main stream of Christian teaching about Christ's death as the "because" of salvation, and that teaching is open to serious objection. Accordingly, what has to be asked is whether, or in what sense, the biblical language of sacrifice and atonement is definitive.

Objections to speaking of Jesus' crucifixion in these terms have usually centered on what such talk says about God. For, among other things, what is evidently being said is that God needs to be pacified, placated, or appeased. Before he can (or before he will) be favorable or save or forgive, a condition must be met: divine honor has to be satisfied, or divine wrath propitiated, or divine justice restored. Meeting this condition, paying

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the price that was owing, compensating for an otherwise irremediable deficit on the part of some if not all human debtors—such was the purpose and effect of Jesus' atoning, sacrificial death. All of this amounts to saying, as Finlan flatly puts it, that God had to be manipulated, coaxed, bribed somehow into being what Jesus himself said God simply *is*, and paid to do what Jesus told his followers they were to do freely, namely, to love and forgive. Surely God can be expected to do likewise.

This line of argument has been laid out time after time. In itself it seems to be cogent enough—so cogent, in fact, that perhaps the only way to refute it finally is to play the mystery card: Who are we to question that God can be, indeed wants to be, propitiated? Finlan does question it, though, and so does Dalferth, although their questioning takes them in rather different directions.

The difference turns on the fourth point mentioned above—whether Christian talk, here and now, can or should or must mean what Christian talk meant when the New Testament was being written. Finlan's stance is that even if it can, in this case it should not. Where Christ's death is concerned, "New Testament theology is an amalgam of profound revelation with retrogressive sacrificial teachings," and this one needs to be smelted and refined. Why? *Retrogressive* is the

operative word. One of Finlan's aims is to bring developmental psychology to bear on Christian theological discourse. By retrogressive he means selfish, arrested, immature. Children figure out how to cope with parental rage by adopting a strategy of "payment through suffering," and some adults never outgrow it. Finlan finds much the same pattern in the soteriological tradition that runs from the New Testament, especially the letter to Hebrews and (parts of) Paul, through Augustine, Anselm, Calvin, and—he might have added—contemporary praise songs with lyrics like

... on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied.

Nowhere in the New Testament is this said in so many words. That is indisputable. Nevertheless, to say it now is arguably to say more concisely what the New Testament does say. Arguably, that is, there has been a valid development in Christian soteriology which preserves and amplifies what has been said from the first.

Finlan would not deny that atonement doctrine has developed. He does deny—and this is his methodological crux—that the canonical status of a biblical writing is a legitimate excuse for canonizing the psychopathology of the writer. The language of sacrifice and atonement, satisfaction and propitiation, appeasement and expiation, whether in the first or the 21st century, is symptomatic of a personal history of parent-child dysfunction. When sacrificial images and metaphors infect Christian thinking, the result is "crazy-making theology" that needs to be diagnosed for what it is and then quarantined. In Finlan's words, "salvation needs to be detached from the crucifixion." God saves in spite of Christ's death, not because of it.

Exactly how God does this is less clear. The brief indications that Finlan provides in *Sacrifice and Atonement*, taken together with previously published work, suggest a migration from West to East: the saving reality is not Christ's cross but his incarnation, in which others participate by theosis, divinization, or incorporation in Christ—themes prominent in Eastern Orthodox theology. If that is a fair assessment, Finlan's theological trajectory appears to take him within hailing distance of Dalferth's position, which uses the language of incorporation to speak about the saving nearness of God (that is, the salvation which is apprehended by faith in the resurrection announcement). Christ saves not by performing some extrinsic "work," but by who he is—a "public person" in whom, by God's Spirit, are included those who are converted by the word of the cross. In similar vein, Finlan observes that an incarnational theology would imply that "it was God's solidarity with humans—the divine Son's thorough sharing of human life—that opened up the way to salvation."

Whether this apparent convergence is more than apparent would depend, of course, on whether being in Christ means for Finlan just what it means for Dalferth. But even if they do mean the same thing, a big difference remains. What Dalferth joins together, Finlan puts asunder. For Finlan, a soteriology of sacrificial atonement and a soteriology of incorporation are

Miraculum

Thesis: What we commonly think of as Miracles, are mere Synchronicities, felicitous accidents, startling coincidences; Whereas that which we call common *is* actually miraculous. Whoa; let's approach this slowly from the side, as we would Edge up shy and careful to a sleeping wolverine. Wolverines Are good to start with, come to think of it—I mean, consider A wolverine carefully. A whopping big one weighs less than Half the dogs you know, not to mention those two obese cats, Yet bears and cougars and even the most stupendously stupid Men back away from wolverines. They have been revered by People who know them well for years beyond counting. They Own their place. They were designed by immeasurable years. There are only a few of them, compared to, for example, ants. Are they not miraculous? Do they not inspire a reverent awe? Can any of us make any of those? No? Can it be that miracles Are things which we cannot comprehend or construct? Hawks, Elk, porpoises, children, damselflies, quasars—the list cannot Ever end, because every time we discover something, we also Discover more that we don't know yet, isn't that certainly so? So that which is miraculous is quotidian. While the occasional Inexplicable recovery, the avoidance of death and mayhem by The thinnest of margins, that only happens on occasion, right? So because it isn't quotidian, perhaps it isn't a miracle. Listen, I know your brain is buzzing right about now—it's happening To me too. But the thought that miracles are normal, isn't that The cool thought of the day? Let's remember that until dinner, You and me, and then savor the miracles with whom we dine.

Brian Doyle

independent and separable, and one of them has to go. For Dalferth, in contrast, the atoning sacrifice of the cross is the very thing that makes possible incorporation in the Christ who was crucified and resurrected.

This divergence is especially evident with regard to Hebrews, where most of the New Testament's sacrificial imagery is concentrated. Finlan sees this letter as an attempt—a failed attempt—to solve a problem that should not have come up in the first place: How can the old cultic sacrifices prefigure and shed light on Christ's death by crucifixion, which at the same time not only surpasses these anticipations utterly but in fact puts an end to them? Since for Finlan Christ's death was *not* a sacrifice, the question that vexes Hebrews simply does not arise. Dalferth, on the other hand, adopts the letter in its entirety and transposes it, mounting his own parallel argument to the effect that, in a certain sense, the cross was indeed a sacrifice, although it also abolishes cultic sacrifices altogether.

The "certain sense" in which Christ's death was sacrificial is expounded by means of an argument that is dense and difficult, even by Dalferth's standard. The idea that is common both to sacrificial rites and to Christ's saving death is "incorporation into the holy." That is what salvation consists in. It is one of three sequential components in the symbolic structure of every sacrifice: first a consecration that identifies the offerer with the offered victim, to which the offerer's identity is symbolically transferred; then the victim's actual death; finally and consequently, the incorporation of the victim-identified offerer within the divinity to which the sacrifice has been offered. What Dalferth finds in the New Testament—specifically in Romans, more than in Hebrews—is a rearrangement of this triad. The identification of the offerer with the offering becomes the inclusive personality of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Instead of humans approaching God, however, God comes to humans by identifying himself with Jesus. And consecration is the culmination rather than the starting point of the reconfigured pattern—the faith that brings a new identity, a share in the person of Christ, and participation in God's saving nearness.

In brief, when the cross is spoken of in the New Testament as sacrificial atonement, what is meant turns out to be not unlike justification *sola fide*. Nothing more is required—certainly not sacrifices, and not some "extension" of God's self-mediation in raising the crucified, which in no way is prolonged by church or ministry or sacraments. Now that Christ has been raised, there is only the word of the cross, faith, and the "reasonable service" or "spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1) of those to whom God has come near.

The dialectical maneuvers by which

the atrocity of a violent death morphs into the undeserved gift of divine presence may, in their own context, be convincing. Or they may not. In any case, to work through Dalferth's concluding chapter side by side with Finlan's book is to be confronted with a dilemma: granted that much of what Christianity has long been saying about the cross of Christ is problematic, maybe even "crazy-making," what is to be done about it?

Can the language of sacrifice and atonement be so radically reconfigured as to bear a sense which seems on the face of it to communicate quite a different idea of salvation? Finlan might protest that this sort of intellectual origami yields at best what he calls a halfway concept, a compromising paradoxical restatement that is really on its way to being rejected. But is outright rejection, on the other hand, preferable? Would it be more honest, more reasonable, more grown-up, to cut the knot and expel from Christian language, hymnody, liturgy, catechesis, and homiletics not only the vocabulary but the grammar of sacrifice? Would it be better, in short, simply to renounce the whole notion that the cross saves? Dalferth might protest that theology has no business asking whether Christ's crucifixion was a saving death: that it was is the nonnegotiable assumption from which theological thinking must start. The fact that it is difficult to grasp is no warrant for dropping it.

And what if both horns of the dilemma are unpersuasive? If neither trashing nor transmogrifying atonement-talk puts all the relevant questions to rest, is there any other possibility? cc

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(from *The Pastor as Minor Poet*)



Prophets of imagined futures

LATELY I'VE BEEN returning to an old love—re-reading William James. I see his defects more clearly now, but I still love him. Uniquely among philosophers, James made a literary art form out of affectionate curiosity. He was so gregarious, one of his contemporaries said, that he could make friends with the lampposts on Irving Street. Teleport James from whatever Swedenborgian otherworldly precinct he currently inhabits, and I imagine he would be just as ready to make friends with the LED streetlights. His empathy seemed boundless, yet as my husband reminds me, there were times when it fell short; one need only skim the lecture on saints in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to see how deeply embedded was James's predisposition to disparage traditional religion.

James acknowledged the distorting effect of all such predispositions; his essay "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" begins by noting "the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives" and ends by declaring "hands off" on the negative evaluation of worldviews for which we lack immediate sympathy. To abide by this interdict, however, turned out to be a challenge even for the open-minded William James.

While reading James, I stumbled upon a little book called *The Religion of the Future*, authored by James's neighbor, Harvard's legendary president Charles William Eliot, a progressive thinker like James with wide sympathies and conspicuous blind spots of his own. In this book, which originated in a 1909 address to the Harvard Summer School of Theology, Eliot predicted the emergence—along lines noticeably favorable to his predispositions—of a new religious consciousness. Purged of crude anthropomorphism, penitential breast-beating, and dramatic altar calls, the religion of the 20th century "will not rely on either a sudden conversion in this world or a sudden paradise in the next." While salvaging the good things of the old religion, the new religion will devote its energies to social improvement rather than personal salvation. The 20th century will trust in providence but tether its camels, not looking for God to intervene directly in the affairs of nations or individuals. Admiration for exemplary leaders will replace the cult of the saints. No fairies or imps will haunt our dreams; no angels or demons will muddle our moral judgments.

Since Eliot's future is our past, it's easy for us to see where his prophecy missed the mark. But could we do much better? In 2014, Brazilian political leader and Harvard Law School philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger published a book bearing the same title as Eliot's and striking some of the same notes. But Unger is more ambitious; his *The Religion of the*

Future is one of several works in which he outlines a radical program for metaphysics and religion sans God.

Unger begins, like the Buddha in his first sermon, by calling attention to the sickness that stalks sentient existence. According to Unger, three "irreparable flaws" are built into the human condition: mortality, "groundlessness," and insatiability. We experience abundant life only to discover that we have to die; we awaken to the power of reason only to find that the whole of reality exceeds our grasp; and despite our finitude, there is no limit to our desires. The world's religions propose to console us for these incurable defects; thus, Unger tells us, Buddhism seeks to overcome the world, Confucianism to humanize the world, and the Abrahamic traditions to struggle against it, inciting both sacred and secular emancipation movements. These are the religions of the past, however, and there is no use holding on to them now that they've lost their power to convince; when we wake up from their enchantment we will see that they have made things worse by encouraging wishful thinking and reinforcing our condition of "belittlement."

Unger's project is a liberation theology for nonbelievers. His religion of the future will not cure us of mortality, groundlessness, or insatiability, but by teaching us to face these facts squarely and refuse to be defined by them, it will conquer our belittlement. Christianity dared to hope for divinization, but the religion of the future will divinize us here and now in the form of a "freer and bigger" life, courageous, loving, self-transcending, open to the future and to other people.

Unger is a consummate speculator—a rare academic figure who thinks big, even at the risk of going over the top. William James, for whom human nature was defined by its "willingness to live on a chance," would have loved him. But my bets are on the religion of the past—not the "halfway house between belief and disbelief" that Unger justly criticizes, but the ancient household of faith. When I'm feeling hopeful about the future, I imagine a revival of full-strength religious traditions, a consequent rebirth of the arts, literature, and culture, and a world in which people of all faiths make common cause against poverty, violence, broken families, and disease. When my thoughts run to future disasters, I imagine a global religious awakening in response. But mostly I am skeptical about predictions, shaped as they are by our wishes or fears. If we're uncertain about the future impact of Brexit or the November election, how much more so when our subject is the religion of the imagined future.

Carol Zaleski is professor of world religions at Smith College.

Why give alms?

by Margaret R. Miles

Issues involving the value of work and the perimeters of generosity have perhaps never been more relevant than they are today. The Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, housed at Vassar College, has documented the social health of our nation according to factors such as child poverty, old-age poverty, and income inequality. Mapping gains and losses from 1970 to 2011, the institute found that both income inequality and child poverty have worsened since 1970. Indeed, as Jesus observed in his sobering paraphrase of Deuteronomy 15:11, “the poor you will always have with you.”

What particular motivation do Christians have to address the pain around us? Jesus’ instruction to “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17) appears to separate financial and spiritual accountabilities. Yet Christians have long recognized that belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ places within the realm of Christian responsibility attention to suffering bodies.

Many Christian authors, from scripture forward, have advocated cultivating something called “soul” and ignoring something called “body”—which in experience are never known except in irreducible unity. A more adequate theology can be stated quite simply. For followers of the incarnate God, bodies of whatever color, gender, sexual orientation, and other variables, *matter*. Accordingly, Christians—in the concrete conditions of our own time and place—must seek and find ways to honor and heal suffering bodies.

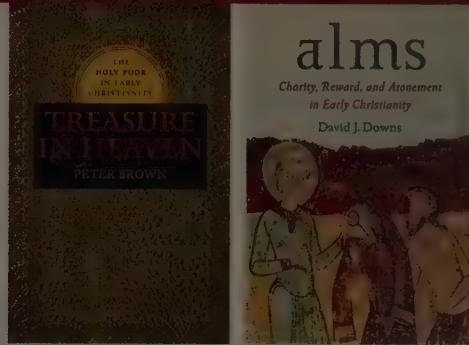
It is unlikely that the solutions relevant to the particularities of ancient cir-

cumstances could be simply adopted for our world. Their efforts might, however, inspire our own efforts to help others. Historians Peter Brown and David Downs demonstrate the timeless importance of heated discussions of this responsibility in all of its dimensions. They do so not in the abstract but in response to concrete social conditions in the Fertile Crescent of late antiquity.

Brown, who taught history at Princeton University, has written widely on economics in early Christianity. Thinking geographically and picturing real people conversing in real space, he identifies clusters of excited attitudes in different locations rather than tracking the slow development of ideas across the world of late antiquity (the stock-in-trade of most church historians). In *Treasure in Heaven*, Brown demonstrates the centrality and longevity of questions about the value of work, bodies, and society in Jewish, Christian, Manichaean, and Buddhist discussions across the Fertile Crescent.

Brown recounts a story of Eusebius of Caesarea to highlight an ancient prejudice regarding the relationship between physical work and the intellectual life. Around 90 CE the Roman emperor Domitian, investigating a rumor that Jesus’ relatives were still alive and fearing that they might be dangerous, summoned them to appear before him. Eusebius explains,

They turned out to be small farmers. . . . They were men of *ponos* (drudgery) and they proved it by doing what the Apostle Paul was said to have done a generation earlier: They showed him their hands, bring-



Treasure in Heaven: The Holy Poor in Early Christianity

By Peter Brown

University of Virginia Press, 192 pp., \$22.95

Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity

By David J. Downs

Baylor University Press, 350 pp., \$59.95

ing forward as proof of their toil the hardness of their bodies and the calluses inflicted on their hands by incessant labor.

Eusebius reports that this demonstration convinced the emperor that Jesus’ family was incapable of endangering the empire with seditious religious ideas. The drudgery of physical work was understood to disqualify intellectual pursuits. Disagreement about work’s value—or lack thereof—was “an explosive issue that affected Roman society as a whole” and influenced the formation of monastic practices regarding work and almsgiving.

In the first two centuries of the Common Era, texts and preachers urged generous almsgiving on grounds that material wealth was transferrable to “treasure in heaven.” But who were to be considered the rightful recipients of alms and other kinds of support by Christians? Who were to be considered “the poor”?

Brown distinguishes between the “real” (economically) poor and the “holy poor.” The holy poor were usually clergy and monks who “had abandoned their usual means of support . . . to pursue the

highest aims of the Christian life." Both needed support. Brown locates within Christians' "novel emphasis on almsgiving to the poor" an intense debate that began with the apostle Paul and continued until its (temporary and partial) resolution in the differing styles of the fourth-century monasteries of greater Syria and Egypt.

Looking to the authoritative writings of St. Paul for guidance, Christians found confusing ambiguity on the question of whether or not the holy poor should be supported by Christian individuals and communities. Eager to distinguish his ministry from that of wandering charlatans, those "religious entrepreneurs" and "charismatic spongers" who sought material support in exchange for spiritual instruction, Paul claimed both that his work among the nascent churches warranted material support and that he supported himself by the labor of his hands. Paul did not settle the question, and two different monastic lifestyles developed.

In continuity with the ancient prejudice demonstrated by Eusebius that work (drudgery) deadens the mind, Syrian monks aspired to "the life of the angels." Their days, freed from work, were spent in prayer and other spiritual labor, considered an invaluable resource for Christian communities. In exchange for their spiritual labor, Syrian monks received alms from both clergy and laity.

In contrast, Egyptian monks chose to work—both in order to be self-supporting and to have means with which to help the impoverished poor. Work was not seen as a curse, but rather as a salient acknowledgment of participation in the human condition. "It was not seen as a degrading condition that only a few exceptional human beings might be enabled to transcend: to work was to be human."

Moreover, the Egyptian monastics believed that to have a body—to work in order to keep eating—was to honor the incarnation. Tertullian had proposed that a human birth guaranteed Christ's humanity, and other patristic authors had suggested that Christ's human suffering and death demonstrated his full humanity. But Athanasius of Alexandria, in his treatise *On the Incarnation*, considered Christ's human body to be the distinctive

mark of his humanity. Moreover, revering Christ's consanguinity with human bodies also prompted "heightened compassion" for the vulnerable bodies of the (economically) poor.

Brown implicitly questions historians' recent preoccupation with sexuality, celibacy, and power in late antiquity—subjects, it must be noted, that Brown himself brought to the fore in earlier publications. He is what Michel Foucault has called the "founder of a discursivity." Over several decades Brown has raised questions and modeled methods that have engendered flurries of scholarship in response to his suggestions. His arguments in this book depend on other scholars' detailed studies of particular places, which he acknowledges with unusual generosity. Rather than burying authors' names in footnotes, he lifts them into his text, praising their careful and insightful scholarship. Over the long course of his career, Brown's scholarship has modeled and engendered collegial scholarly conversation. One such conversation partner is Downs, who both cites and is cited by Brown.

In *Alms*, Downs, who teaches New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, documents in detail an apparent incongruity in early Christian teaching on how sin can be atoned. Christ's death on the cross was understood as the only means of atonement for sin, yet a vast literature advocates another method for expiating sin. For example, in the context of a severe shortage of food in fourth century Cappadocia, Basil of Caesarea preached that even original sin could be "destroyed" by charity: "For as sin came through Adam's evil act of eating, so we ourselves blot out his treacherous consumption if we remedy the need and hunger of a brother."

Downs is careful to distinguish between meritorious almsgiving and atoning almsgiving. The former indicates almsgiving in which reward is expected to accumulate to the donor; the latter understands charity as a means of "canceling, cleansing, covering, extinguishing, lightening, or in some way atoning for

Margaret R. Miles is professor emerita of historical theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

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human sin and/or its consequences.” Downs’s interest lies in Christian advocacy for atoning almsgiving and its emergence from scriptural exegesis.

Discussing atoning almsgiving from the New Testament to the mid-third century CE, Downs traces the historical roots and development of the model “from its antecedents in the Old Testament and the literature of Second Temple Judaism” to New Testament statements linking almsgiving and reward. He discusses patristic authors to the time of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, whose treatise *On Works and Alms* “represents a bold and innovative attempt to hold together the confession that forgiveness, redemption, and healing are possible only through the suffering and death of Christ and the conviction that sins after baptism can be washed away by deeds of mercy.” Downs shows that Cyprian was the first Christian author to see a need to justify the claim that the practice of merciful deeds cleanses or covers sins.

Downs finds useful Hans-Georg Gadamer’s insistence that the meaning of a text cannot be separated from its history of influence. Reception theory

assumes that meaning is not inherent in a text but instead emerges as the result of a “conversation between a text, the influence of that text, and an interpreter or interpretive community.” Accordingly, Downs carefully considers the interpretation history of a scriptural passage frequently cited by advocates of atoning almsgiving: the claim that “love covers a multitude of sins” in 1 Peter 4:8. Patristic authors agreed that the love that covers a multitude of sins refers not primarily to God’s love for humanity, but rather that “human love covers the sins of those who demonstrate such love.”

Downs recognizes that his documentation of patristic interpretations of 1 Peter 4:8 challenges 16th-century reformers’ rejection of “works” as efficacious toward salvation. Contemporary evangelical Protestants may also be wary of the apparent ease with which the patristic authors held together both the saving significance of Christ’s death and the affirmation that mercifully caring for the needy covers a multitude of donors’ sins.

Brown and Downs uncover differing attitudes toward bodies in Christian communities of the first centuries. Both discern that attitudes toward physical

work relate to understandings of the centrality of the incarnation to the Christian message. While Brown links Egyptian monks’ regard for work to emphasis on the incarnation, Downs finds that advocacy of meritorious and atoning almsgiving responded directly to “those who disregarded the body, including the bodies of the poor.” Both books contribute generously to our knowledge of the concrete discussions underlying late antiquity theological questions.

“Benevolence is good, but when is it a moral mistake?” Iris Murdoch asked in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Her question is not answered by either Brown or Downs. In times of great personal and social vulnerability, exhortations to Christians to give to those in need apparently did not require further specification.

As Downs points out, late antiquity was a time of great instability, for which the “binary reality” of stable categories of rich and poor are inadequate. A person who at one time could be an almsgiver might, in rapidly changing circumstances, soon be in need of alms. In these conditions, advocacy and activism for social change did not suggest itself to Christians. Indeed, Christian authors often rationalized social injustice by idealizing and spiritualizing the suffering of the economic poor. And the poor were praised for their (involuntary) humility and dependence on God, ignoring the physical reality of their crushing material deprivation. Two centuries later, Augustine employed the same strategy in *The City of God* when he ignored the harsh physical reality of slavery and opined that it is a “happier lot to be a slave of a man than of a lust.”

Many Christians today will not find either the accumulation of “treasure in heaven” or the concept of “atoning almsgiving” attractive incentives for generosity. Without lapsing into intricate and inevitably unedifying fourth-century controversies, I suggest that, in the parlance of our time and place, the simple insistence that bodies matter can express our understanding of what it means for us today to act out—to body forth—our belief in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

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One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds: Spirituality, Identity, and Resistance across Islamic Lands

By Raymond William Baker
Oxford University Press, 392 pp., \$34.95

Raymond Baker offers some good news amid the gloom of global terrorism, opening up the little-known world of *wasatiyya*—or centrist—Islam. It is the Islam of the “new” intellectuals of the “Islamic Revival,” including legal scholar Mohammed al-Ghazali (d. 1996); journalist Fahmi Huwaidi; Al Jazeera broadcaster Yusuf al-Qaradawi; and politicians Necmettin Erbakan (d. 2011), Alija Izetbegovic (d. 2003), and Rachid Ghannouchi. Baker sees these leaders as “heralds” of an “Islamic renewal” who hold sway over a majority of Muslims around the world through their thinking and writing on globalization, democracy, social justice, and freedom.

Baker, who teaches international politics at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and political science at the American University in Cairo, provides a scathing critique of Western—and particularly American—imperialism. Reacting to orientalist attitudes and to the work of his mentor Samuel Huntington, he seizes every opportunity to remind the reader that many of the present crises in the Middle East have arisen as a result of the West’s ill-considered interventions, greed, and ineptitude. This criticism is particularly refreshing coming from an American, albeit one who has spent a large part of his adult life living in Cairo and traveling in Islamic lands.

The title suggests that Baker offers a grand tour of the great diversity of expressions of Islam around the world. Instead, the book is a narrowly focused exploration of one particular stream, which the author terms the “River of Life.” Baker is clearly enamored of the

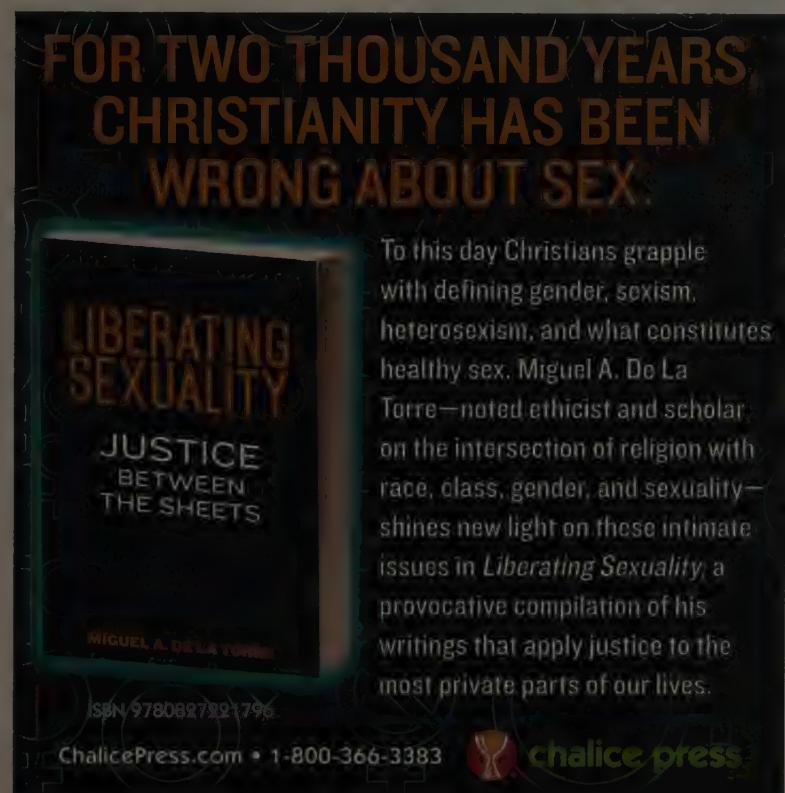
Qur'an, which he quotes freely, and he seems to identify with Islam without declaring allegiance to it. He sees the *wasatiyya* as representing “Islam itself,” as though he has the authority to pronounce it the correct interpretation. On the other streams within Islam he has little to say. In a few sentences he writes off “inherited Islamic institutions like Al-Azhar,” the leading Sunni university in the world, as “docile official Islam.” He labels interpretations of Islam that espouse violence “criminal versions of Islam” and deems them unworthy of further discussion or explanation. He does not discuss progressive Muslims such as Abdullahi an-Na'im, who advocates a form of secular state, or feminists such as Fatema Mernissi.

Geographically Baker's gaze is fixed on what he calls the “Islamic strategic triangle”: the “three great demographic and cultural reservoirs” of Egypt, Turkey, and Iran. In his recounting, all great

Islamic thought has hailed from these three countries. Apart from an occasional mention, the great majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims disappear into obscurity; Asian and African Muslims are completely unrepresented. Even “retrograde Wahhabi Islam” receives scant mention, despite its colossal influence. Baker mentions the Salafis even less.

Doubtless such movements do not fit with Baker's romanticized view of Islam and Shari'a as “open, inclusive, and responsive to the world.” Yet they cannot and should not be ignored. They are legitimate examples of the “many Muslim worlds” announced in the book's title.

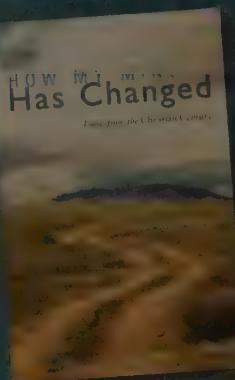
Controversially, Baker suggests that Muslims do not need to follow the example of Muhammad literally. He insists that Islam promotes equality, justice, and freedom, but some of the paragons whom he quotes have not



Reviewed by Richard McCallum, fellow of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford, England

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been so convinced. The issue of apostasy has become a touchstone for many for assessing the claims of Islam. Both al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi hold traditional conservative views on the treatment of apostates. In one court case, al-Ghazali, a professor of Islamic law, famously supported the death penalty and private assassination for apostates. Although al-Qaradawi tolerates minor—that is, private—apostasy, he insists on the death penalty for major apostasy—apostasy that has been made public. Not all Muslims agree with al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi, but it will be difficult for many non-Muslims to understand how the *wasatiyya* can claim to promote justice and freedom while such views persist.

Many Christians will be disappointed by Baker's representation of the Christian faith. He seems to compare suicide bombers with early Christian martyrs. The only explicit quotes from Christians are ill-judged, derogatory remarks about Islam made by the likes of Jerry Vines, Franklin Graham, and Jerry Falwell. Baker makes no reference to Christians who have sought to understand Islam fairly, and he misses the points at which Christian thought might shed light.

Baker's final conclusion is the most telling. Baker comments that "Jesus, the Savior of Christianity, returned to his Father in heaven. The Holy Qur'an remained on earth to provide guidance for humanity's spiritual and worldly struggles." Christianity, therefore, has nothing to say to the world today. Baker does not mention the Bible, the Holy Spirit, the reign of God, or the church. For him "the Message"—presumably as interpreted by the *wasatiyya*—"came from God." Islam alone "inspires humanity" today.

One Islam, Many Muslim Worlds corrects an imbalance by highlighting centrist Islam and reminds the West of its own history of violent imperialism, much of it perpetrated in the name of religion. But Baker fails to appraise adequately and critically Islam's texts and history in the light of the great diversity of Muslim worlds. The book thus falls short of the potential and promise of its title.

**The Mormon Jesus:
A Biography**
By John G. Turner
Harvard University Press, 368 pp., \$29.95

Four years ago, this book would have piqued the interest of thousands of Americans. We were then living amid "the Mormon Moment." Mitt Romney was pressing to unseat President Barack Obama and become the first Mormon patriarch to occupy the White House. Broadway audiences flocked to *The Book of Mormon*, which won a host of awards. Mormon Girl, also known as Joanna Brooks, made a guest appearance on *The Daily Show* where she and Jon Stewart awkwardly discussed religious food traditions. Everyone seemed to love Saratoga Springs, Utah, mayor Mia Love, a Haitian American and a Mormon convert. She almost won a seat in Congress that year. Four years ago, it seemed that anything and everything related to Mormonism was ripe for public picking.

How the times have changed. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints makes national or international news only when its leadership makes a decision or statement against LGBT rights or women's rights. Mia Love actually won a spot in Congress in 2014, but no one seemed excited. In July of that year, a writer for the *New York Times* announced "the end of the 'Mormon Moment.'" With this changing of the times it's hard to imagine any groups, except for scholars and Mormons themselves, to be curious about historian John G. Turner's new book *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography*. As far as academic books are concerned, it is fairly good. For exciting, pathbreaking scholarly work, however, one should look elsewhere. And in terms of political or religious flavors of the month, *The Mormon Jesus* may be expired before it hits the shelves.

Turner meticulously combs through the various ways Mormon Americans have thought about, seen, heard, de-

Reviewed by Edward J. Blum, who is coauthor of
The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the
Saga of Race in America (2012).

scribed, depicted, and worshiped Jesus. Each chapter* focuses on a different theme. One examines the place of Jesus in the Book of Mormon ("translated" by Joseph Smith in the late 1820s and first printed in 1830). In another chapter, Turner discusses the visionary experiences of Mormons who claim to have seen Jesus. Other chapters delve into Mormon eschatology, the role of Jesus in temple ceremonies, and why Mormons seem to insist that Jesus was white. *The Mormon Jesus* is an able scholarly work. Secondary sources are consulted; primary sources are quoted.

Along the way, Turner showcases how Mormonism past and present follows in the line of other Christian traditions, connects with various contexts in American history, and deviates from religious norms and customs. As was the case in Turner's earlier biography of Brigham Young, the author seems most at home when comparing and contrast-

ing Mormonism with American evangelicalism and Christian traditionalism. *The Mormon Jesus* is less about the role of Jesus in shaping Mormon culture and more about how Mormon conceptions of Jesus stack up against other Christian ones.

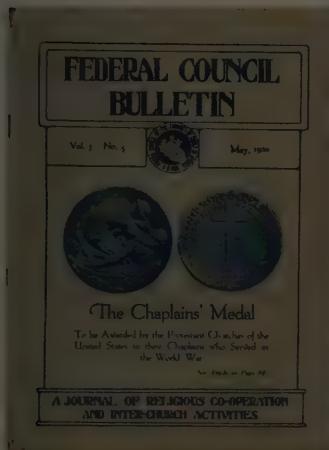
The most fascinating chapter of the book, "The Great Bridegroom," examines Mormon discussions of Jesus as husband and parent. Before judging this as yet another example of Mormonism's singular mix of religious symbol and family life, readers may want to remember that in the parable of the ten virgins the bridegroom seems to be Jesus. The church itself is described in Ephesians as the bride of Christ. Some Catholic nuns believe themselves to be married or betrothed to Jesus. Put simply, there are many Christians traditions that espouse a spousal place for Jesus. Everyone should drop their stones by their sides.

Mormon history, however, takes a unique turn when it comes to Jesus as husband. Throughout history, leading Mormons have voiced distinct approaches regarding the bodies of God and Jesus. The first two points are not strongly debated within the Mormon church: God has a body and Jesus had one before he became flesh 2,000 years ago. The third point has been far more controversial: both God and Jesus have used their bodies in procreative acts to create other bodies. In short, God and Jesus have made babies—God with the Heavenly Mother, and Jesus with one of his wives. For these Mormons, Jesus had at least one wife, perhaps more than one, and he probably had children. As Turner is quick to mention, dreams of a married Jesus who provided a biological lineage are not confined to Mormon circles. Not only have some Protestant thinkers and Catholic apostates toyed with the topic of a married Jesus, but millions of read-



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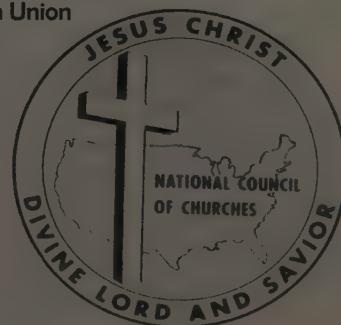
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ers gushed over Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which featured descendants of Jesus as part of its intricate plot.

Most of *The Mormon Jesus* pertains to the first years of Mormonism and the 19th century. It was during that time that Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and others deviated from and experimented with the Protestant Christianity of their day. It was during those decades, moreover, that the church was more elastic. Believers had greater flexibility in experience and expression. During the 20th and 21st centuries, the church has become more bureaucratic and increasingly sensitive to the opinions of outsiders. During these years, the more exotic Mormon teachings about Jesus (such as his many wives) have been downplayed or outright denounced, while the more normative elements (such as incarnations of Jesus in the so-called Old Testament) have been pronounced.

As I read this book, I was reminded of how impressive Jaroslav Pelikan's *Jesus*

Through the Centuries (1985) and Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus* (2003) are. For those interested in a general and holistic sense of how Christians have considered Jesus, Pelikan's book is the one to read. For those desiring a readable and erudite romp through the ways Americans have reconfigured Jesus, Prothero's will be a joy. Only those truly dedicated to American religious history and Mormon studies will gravitate to Turner's *The Mormon Jesus*.

Alas, if this book had been available in 2012, Jon Stewart could have poked fun at Mitt Romney by asking how many "binders full of women" Jesus had. Turner could have laughed at the joke and boiled down some of his diligent research into sound bites, and the Mormon Moment may have provided yet another scholarly moment. Timini may not be everything, but just like in comedy, it matters a lot. In the case of *The Mormon Jesus*, we may just have to wait for the Mormon Moment's second

coming. When will that be? As for that day or hour, it may be as Jesus told his disciples: "No one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son."

Microaggressions in Ministry: Confronting the Hidden Violence of Everyday Church

By Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber
Westminster John Knox, 172 pp.,
\$20.00 paperback

Many Christians can identify the contours of overt bigotry and discrimination. Common examples include an African American being called the n-word, laws prohibiting transgender people from using the bathroom corresponding to their gender identity, or a woman being paid less than a man for the same job.



Cody Sanders and Angela Yarber invite readers into the valuable but often uncomfortable wrestling with less recognizable forms of inequity known as microaggressions. Sanders is a pastor and theologian at Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square, and Yarber is a theologian, artist, and teacher who consults with churches and denominational bodies. Both authors identify as queer, and both acknowledge their own experiences with microaggressions. Relying on psychologist Derald Wing Sue's framework, they define microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership."

Through theoretical analysis, qualitative exploration, and testing the practices of the church, Sanders and Yarber reveal the pain of being on the receiving end of microaggressions. Far from being meaningless slights with minimal harm, microaggressions are mundane spiritual, psychic, and emotional intrusions into the everyday lives of those who have historically been marginalized and oppressed. Although Sanders and Yarber provide a considerable breakdown of the psychosocial dimensions of this oppressive practice in ministry, they fail to frame the issue theologically. A Christian theological assessment of the denial of humanity demonstrated through microaggressions would name it as sin.

Sanders and Yarber offer a voice that is rarely heard in the experiences of people of color, women, and LGBTQ people. They articulate the subtle, nuanced ways in which racism, sexism, heteronormativity, transphobia, and gendered assaults take form. This work is particularly important for progressive Christians and churches, who consider themselves open and inclusive but are often complicit in these silent, hidden forms of emotional violence.

The authors identify three forms of microaggression: "microinsults," which might be manifested in rude and condescending behavior; "microinvalidations," which exclude people from full and authentic participation in the life of the community; and "microassaults," which are deliberate attacks on

people based on gender, race, or sexual identity.

Sanders and Yarber provide vignettes of people who have been on the receiving end of microaggressions, and they consider how microaggressions are conceived and arise in worship, preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.

Sanders and Yarber aim to provide practical resources for those who experience individual and communal encounters with microaggressions. One of the most effective ways they do this is with the vignettes that appear in the middle section of the book. Here the authors move beyond theory and explanation, confronting readers with the tangible human reality of individual stories. These stories help readers understand that impact matters as much as intent when a black man's theology is dismissed by his peers and supervisor in clinical pastoral education; when the newest female member of the church is invited only to teach Sunday school and join the hospitality team; when a transgender deacon is asked by other church members about his "real name." In these and many other vivid examples, Sanders and Yarber confront readers with the humanity of those who experience microaggressions and the subtlety of the violence they encounter.

For such a thoughtful and esteemed study, the book's failure to identify sin explicitly and offer a robust theological analysis of microaggressions is a significant omission. Jesus says in Matthew 25, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Discrimination and exclusion illustrate our brokenness as human beings who continuously fail to extend the love that is demonstrated in Christ's ministry. For Christians, identifying and naming microaggressions—confessing them as sin—is a step toward combatting them. Such confession brings God into the hearts of individuals and communities and invites the possibility of transformation.

Reviewed by Kerri Allen, chaplain at NorthShore Hospice in the Chicago suburbs and Ph.D. student in theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

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Roots and Sky: A Journey Home in Four Seasons

By Christie Purifoy

Revell, 208 pp., \$13.99 paperback

This memoir traces the life of one family through a calendar year, attending to the beauty and pain of transitions, faith, and homemaking. Christie Purifoy, who taught composition and literature at the University of Chicago before moving to a farmhouse in Pennsylvania, chronicles the birth of her fourth child, the struggle to create community with new neighbors, and the process of settling into a home with seemingly never-ending repairs. Connecting moments in her family's narrative with the liturgical year, Purifoy presents a world suffused with the incarnation: "Our God has never despised the dirt, and he once wrapped himself in dust." Even in the jagged edges of life, God's glory shines. According to Purifoy, we are the cultivators of this glory.

Four Testaments: Tao Te Ching, Analects, Dhammapada, Bhagavad Gita: Sacred Scriptures of Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism

Edited by Brian Arthur Brown
Rowman & Littlefield, 496 pp., \$55.00

In a companion volume to *Three Testaments: Torah, Gospel, and Quran*, Canadian pastor Brian Arthur Brown presents the sacred scriptures of four Eastern faith traditions alongside critical essays about the texts. Accessible to non-scholars, Brown's underlying narrative posits an ancient meeting between the textual traditions of East and West in the Zoroastrian faith. The primary value of this book for many readers, however, will be in the words of the scriptures themselves. Locating scriptures of diverse traditions on adjacent pages is not without risk—but it is valuable for those who seek to be illuminated by the texts and moved to fruitful dialogue.

The People v. reality

I was in high school during the O. J. Simpson trial. I remember a teacher rolling a TV cart into the classroom to watch the verdict. My family was in a phase of evangelicalism that held TV and popular culture at arm's length.

Perhaps it's because I missed formative moments in popular culture that I couldn't stop watching *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, the first season of FX's new American Crime Story series. The show recreates the trial and surrounding events from the perspective of the prosecution and defense teams. Friends who obsessively watched the real trial were just as addicted to the television version as I was. A colleague who couldn't watch the season finale the first night it aired said, "Don't tell me how it ends!"

Watching *The People v. O. J. Simpson* invokes the same sense of vertigo many Americans felt watching the real trial: Where do we draw the line between a believable story and "what really happened"? Or is there such a line? Halfway through the series, prosecuting attorney Marcia Clark (played by Sarah Paulson) mocks the defense strategy. "The defense is just making up stories," she huffs, confident in the power of evidence to trump all. "People like stories," responds her assistant, Chris Darden (Sterling K. Brown).

A story can remake reality, especially when that story confirms our lived experience. When black jurors found O. J. Simpson not guilty, they were not disregarding a "mountain of evidence" in

favor of some half-baked conspiracy theory about racist cops. They were confirming lived experience—decades of corrupt policing had yielded a mountain of evidence that made plausible the story O. J.'s defense lawyers told.

The O. J. trial was a collision of long-unexamined racism, celebrity culture, opinion-generated news, and a hunger for what philosopher Roland Barthes called the "reality effect"—the sense that mediated events are more real than reality itself.

The People v. O. J. Simpson is fiction, but it draws on news shows like *Dateline* and *48 Hours*. Like these shows, reality TV is compelling: viewers love to play judge and jury. Contestant-based reality shows use the same formula, but instead of figuring out a grisly murder case, viewers vote someone off the island or follow "real people" as they fall in love, lose weight, compete in daring contests, or destroy each other's reputations. All of these shows blur the line between reality and entertainment.

There is an added element to reality TV, an alchemical reaction that makes it unlike any scripted show. We aren't just watching reality happen to someone else: our watching creates reality. An unknown singer is catapulted into a national performance career. The newlyweds who fell in love before our eyes dominate the tabloids. The Kardashians build an empire. Donald Trump becomes a presidential candidate.



BLURRED FACTS: *O. J. Simpson* (Cuba Gooding Jr.) takes a polygraph test in *The People v. O. J. Simpson*

If we are looking for the moment that precipitated our fall into the oversaturated media blitz that is our common life, we might consider the O. J. trial and Judge Ito's fateful decision to allow television cameras into his courtroom. And we stepped off a cliff when prosecutor Marcia Clark changed her hairstyle in response to media criticism. We've been in free fall ever since.

Of course, when we're watching *The People v. O. J. Simpson*, we don't feel as if we're shaping culture. It feels like passive entertainment: distraction, vice, or guilty pleasure. We pick and choose what we watch, or if we watch. But whether or not we participate in creating the new reality, it's happening. This is the paradox of our mediated reality: neat categories have broken down. Politics is blurred with entertainment; the facts are blurred with intentional fictions. Nothing stays in its place anymore.

The People v. O. J. Simpson is a fictionalized TV show about a real event that blurred the lines between entertainment and reality. Even as we see the irony in the situation, we find ourselves unable to look away.

The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University.

Should truth in advertising laws apply to religious claims? Should governments be in the business of defining authentic miracles? Which pastors are genuine, and which are fakes?

However fanciful such questions might seem, all these issues are very much alive in contemporary Africa. The Christian upsurge of the past half century has been marked by widespread claims of healing and miracles, often in the context of charismatic revivals and crusades. As in any such great awakening since apostolic times, a number of wild and bizarre claims have been made, and there is some evidence of active fraud. Every society has its own versions of Elmer Gantry, people who use religious deception as a money-making tool. The question then arises of who is meant to regulate or suppress such outbreaks.

One early attempt occurred in Nigeria in 2004, when the National Broadcasting Commission tried to prohibit anyone from showing "unverifiable" miracle healings on television.

The problem with that rule was obvious: What would constitute verification or proof of a miracle? The regulation was withdrawn. But similar efforts have been made, usually following a media exposé of some egregious piece of trickery. In South Africa, one small church was banned from making advertisements that showed discarded canes and crutches. Just last year,

When does faith become fraudulent?

several Nigerians were arrested on the charge of being fake pastors running a fraudulent church offering deceptive miracles.

As in the 2004 broadcasting controversy, it remains difficult to decide exactly who and what is "fake" and "fraudulent." That issue would be thorny enough anywhere, but contemporary Africa is a world of upstart churches experiencing mushroom growth, and a great many men and women see themselves as spiritually called or even as prophetic figures, although they lack formal qualifications. So who is to say which churches or pastors are authentic and which are not?

Attempts to regulate religious behavior run the risk of interfering with religious freedom, and recent events in Kenya have powerfully reinforced the slippery-slope argument. The nation faces religious challenges on two fronts, with mosques being accused of radicalizing young people and churches being charged with deceptive miracles. A documentary on "prayer predators" was particularly explosive.

In response, the Kenyan government offered a draconian code of Religious Societies Rules (2015). Among its requirements, all religious bodies were to register with the government and keep records on their followers. All clergy were also required to hold formal qualifications,

such as degrees in theology—in a world in which even the ministers of long-established denominations lack such credentials. If a degree is essential to the making of a true pastor, then some of Africa's most renowned spiritual figures stand in grave danger.

The rules provoked a backlash from churches great and small, with the Catholic Church in the vanguard. They objected to the prospect of becoming agents of government, and they also highlighted an issue that might not be immediately apparent to non-Africans. At a time when churches are adding so many members daily, how can they be expected to keep their membership rolls up to date? In the face of widespread protests, the government suspended the rules. It is virtually certain, though, that comparable legal battles lie ahead in other countries.

This is one area in which African countries could learn from American experience. In the 1930s, the United States was home to a potent movement called I AM, led by Guy and Edna Ballard. I AM ran a spectacular money-making operation based on outrageous and increasingly ludicrous claims. (Anyone for a portrait of Jesus that he actually sat for?) The group was prosecuted for fraudulently collecting donations on

the basis of religious claims that the defendants themselves did not believe.

The case of *United States v. Ballard* (1944) ended up in the Supreme Court, where it remains a mainstay of the case law on religious liberty. The court voided the conviction on the grounds that it was wrong ever to have asked whether the Ballards themselves actually believed what they preached.

In a memorable dissent, Justice Robert Jackson went considerably further. While he thought the Ballards taught "humbug," he said that issue "does not dispose of the constitutional question whether misrepresentation of religious experience or belief is prosecutable." Cults like I AM could do financial harm to "overcredulous people" who sometimes received "mental and spiritual poison" in consequence, but "the price of freedom of religion or of speech or of the press is that we must put up with . . . a good deal of rubbish." And if you were to demand that clergy actually believed what they officially taught, then plenty of orthodox and mainline pastors ran the risk of prosecution.

In conclusion, he said, "I would . . . have done with this business of judicially examining other people's faiths." Those are words to live by.

Philip Jenkins's Notes from the Global Church appear in every other issue.

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Transfiguration, by Julia Stankova

Julia Stankova began her painting career in Sofia, Bulgaria, restoring icons. Inspired by the symbolic meaning of the images, she began painting her own works. Her personal engagement with her paintings was formed, she says, when she started reading the New Testament. "I took my place in the queue behind the apostles waiting for Christ to wash my feet too." In *Transfiguration*, Stankova brings her own devotion, imagination, and theology to the iconic tradition.

Art selection and comment by Lil Copan, a painter and editor.



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